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No. 13 *Issued Weekly.*
June 7, 1899.

M. J. IVERS & CO., Publishers.
(James Sullivan, Proprietor.)
379 Pearl Street, New York.

Price 5 Cents.
\$2.50 a Year.

Vol. 1.

BUCKHORN BILL; or, The Red Rifle Team.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "DOUBLE DAGGERS," ETC., ETC.



BUCKHORN BILL.

EDWARD L. WHEELER'S

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BUCKHORN BILL

Buckhorn Bill;

OR,

THE RED RIFLE TEAM.

A Tale of the Dakota Moonshiners.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "DOUBLE DAGGERS,"
 "BUFFALO BEN," "BOB WOOLF," "WILD IVAN,"
 "DEATH-FACE," "THE PHANTOM MINER,"
 "OLD AVALANCHE," "JIM BLUDSOE, JR.,"
 ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT'S WORK.

"Go on, Chub!" spoke a clear ringing voice, which was that of one of two persons, who were crossing the moonlight's glory upon a wild rolling expanse of prairie, not half a hundred miles north of old Fort Alexander, in Dakota. "Go on, you beast, or I'll wallop ye till ye can't stand alone. Durnedest lazy hoss—wish the old folks would sell him."

"Shall we reach home before long, Bill?" queried a sweet girlish voice, that of the other rider, as she urged her horse up alongside that of the boy. "I hope you are not going wrong."

"Pooh! no," replied the youth, with a laugh of reassurance; "ye ked take old Chub 'way down into Kansas, an' no fear but what she'd find her way back to dad's ranch."

These two night riders were respectively aged sixteen and fourteen—the first a boy the other a girl. Evidently they were brother and sister.

The boy was well-developed, with a form of striking grace and outline, each muscle and nerve large and hard; life from infancy on the frontier had imparted to him God's greatest gifts, strength, health, and a promising approach to fine manhood.

His face was ruddy and smooth, his eyes brown and sparkling, and his hair short and of a dark hue. He was attired in buckskin trowsers, with a waist-coat of some coarse cloth belted around him, and a slouch hat over his brown, short curls. Hewas armed with a handsome repeating rifle, this was all. No display of belt-arms made he; he was evidently content with his own trusty piece.

His horse was a wiry little old beast of part mustang, blood a fast traveler when necessity demanded, but habitually lazy and stubborn.

The youth's companion was a very pretty little picture of girlish beauty and innocence. She was smaller than her companion, budding into fullness of form, with a sweet, shy face framed in a half-wreath of sunny, golden curls, and eyes of blue which at once bespoke the gentleness and purity of her young heart. She was plainly attired in calico, and unarmed, and with her straw hat off, and the breeze tossing her wealth of hair about, she looked like a fairy as she galloped gracefully along, mounted upon a stanch, well-bottomed little Indian pony.

The two in countenance greatly resembled each other.

They were the children of a ranchman named Burnham, who, with others, had started a colony about sixty-five miles above Alexander several years prior to our story. This colony had been immensely successful, for not only had it brought thrift and enterprise into an unsettled region, but had scattered settlers for many miles around through an extensive tract of rich grazing country. Gradually civilization had come in until Burnham's colony was widely known, and Philip Burnham was a man of great popularity.

Leaving his ranch under the charge of his wife

and young son, he had engaged in speculation on lands, and it was not uncommon for him to be absent from home for weeks at a time.

It was for the purpose of learning his whereabouts that young Bill and his sister had made the long, terrible trip to Fort Alexander, and were now returning toward home, and an anxious wife-mother, with no intelligence from the father, who had not been heard from since his departure, a month previous.

The news at Alexander was discouraging. He had not been seen there.

"Tell ye what—guess the old man's puckacheed to git rid of us, and we might as well crawl home, and let him shift upon his own resposneribilities," Bill had said, and they had started and got thus far on their journey.

It was a beauteous night in the beginning of August, with a gentle breeze whispering through the tall, rus ling grass and the moon pouring down her whole voluminous gift of mellow r diance upon mother earth. Away, miles to the east, like a silver thread in the gold, ran the waters of Rubicon creek, in a zig-zag course; to the west a dark line delineated the existence of a belt of timber; far to the north lay Burnham's colony, and beyond that still the iron track of the Northern Pacific railroad, as it pointed toward the rising sun. Over all hung a peculiar haze, rendering objects at a distance indistinct, despite the glorious effulgence of the moon.

"Go 'long, Chub; ye ain't got more nor a dozen miles to go, yet, afore yer nostrils will smell o' new-mown hay, an' ye ken berry yer nose inter a fodder-trough. As fer myself, I reckon I'd like ter make ther acquaintance uv a good squar' meal, too!"

"A dozen miles, yet, Bill? It seems to me that I could never ride that distance, I am so tired," sighed the girl, as she gazed ahead over the rolling expanse of prairie sea.

"You're tired, are ye, Maolin! Well, sis, cheer up an' we'll soon git hum, in good shape. Reckon ma'am will be mighty tickled ter see us, 'spite the fact that we haven't any news from dad."

"But, why couldn't we sleep on the prairie, Bill, and then go on in the morning?"

"'Ca'se why, I don't keer about hevin' ther buzzards roost onto my carcass. Buzzards aire uncommon lean and hungry this year, wi' more storage capacity thun ever before. 'Sides, 'tain't any too safe fer ordinary mortals ter be caught a-sleepin' on these yere peraries, now'days."

"Why, Bill?"

"Dunno why, sis, but 'tain't safe. Heerd an' old chap sayin', up at Squatterville, thet there's mighty strange things a-goin' on in thes kentry around us, what would puzzle a Methodist preecher. Guess he know'd sum more'n he told, too—leastways, et appeared so ter me. An' I've picked up a few p'int along back, w'at war interestin'."

"Do you think there's going to be trouble with the Sioux, Bill?"

"No, not unless these devils o' white cusses gets 'em roused. Don't reckon they dare do much so nigh ther fort, though old Red Nose is full as mean a skunk as old Settin' Bull. No, 'tain't Injuns—thar ain't a-goin' ter be much of an open commotion; but there's deviltry a-goin' on, every day, w'at we don't know about."

"What, Bill?" Maolin asked.

But the youth did not reply. His head was dropped upon his breast, and his whole attention was engrossed in some perplexing thought.

Thus they galloped along through the haze of the beautiful night, the thud! thud! of the horses' feet beating a strange tattoo upon the turf.

All nature seemed lulled into a sweet, smiling slumber, its breath only coming in faint little puffs; not the chirp of an insect or the note of a bird was heard; a strange, drowsing silence pervaded earth and atmosphere, such as you no doubt have often observed on a quiet Sabba'h day in the country—

the sweetly peaceful country, where on the Lord's Day, rest and peace are for all, so unlike what you find in our big cities, with their restless turmoil.

Steadily the two night-riders kept on; as if catching a far-away scent of their home pastures, the well-worn steeds now needed no urging, but pushed ahead with a manifest eagerness.

By and by they dashed over the crest of a prairie billow, and down into a little valley or seam, with which the face of nature was furrowed over and over again.

Heedlessly they rode down into the little valley; then there came an awakening.

Without warning their horses were seized by the bits and thrown back on their haunches, and a dozen pairs of stout hands gave assistance in pulling the two astonished travelers from their saddles.

The moonlight seemed to glow down with double intensity, just then, and Little Bill was able to survey his captors, while they were occupied in binding his hands and feet.

There were at least twenty-five of them, all burly, muscular fellows, with long beards and masks covering their faces from the tip of the nose to the root of the hair, giving to them a weird aspect. They were dressed in painted buckskin of a crimson hue, and wore plumed slouch hats.

The leader was a tall, portly man, but closely disguised, so that no one having seen him before in another guise would have been able to recognize him now.

Yet something made Little Bill believe that he had seen him before—where or when, he had not the slightest idea.

The two captives' hands were bound, and then they were replaced and bound upon their horses. A consultation was then held, after which the leader advanced, surveying the youth savagely, through the eye-holes in the mask.

"You're Phil Burnham's son, ain't ye?" was the hoarse, growling demand, and the speaker stopped a few paces off.

"Reckon I am," Little Bill replied, without flinching. "What difference does it make to you?"

"A great deal, you young cuss," was the reply; then the man turned to his followers:

"Mount, boys, and let's be off. The captain will be b'ilin' ef we don't hurry up wi' the brats."

A general mount was accordingly made, and the cavalcade set off in a direction slightly nor'westerly to the course Bill had been following.

First, however, precaution had been taken to gag and blindfold the captives, and thus they were neither able to see or speak, during what seemed an interminable ride.

When they were taken from the horses at last, and their eyes uncovered, they found themselves among the same crowd of masked ruffians, only deep down in the wood-tangled depths of a dark ravine, which Bill never remembered having seen, wide as was his acquaintance with the surrounding country.

The moon was sinking westward with diminished power of light, which showed the observant youth that morning was not far off.

Very little of the moonlight penetrated to the gulch bottom through the overhanging tree-tops, so that the captors had lighted a fire, and into the reflection of this the two prisoners were led.

A man stood in the light of this fire, whom Bill at once concluded was the captain of the gang.

And he was not wrong in his supposition, as was plain, when the man spoke.

He was a short, thick-set person, attired in buckskin, and masked like his companions.

Little more could be said of his appearance, on account of his face being partly concealed.

He advanced closer and peered searchingly down into Little Bill's face, with eyes that seemed on fire.

"Are you sure you're Phil Burnham's boy?" he questioned, doubtfully.

"Yes, I am," was the reply of Bill, as he began to

bristle with wrath. "That's the second time I've sed so, to-night, though tain't none o' yer bizness whose son I am. I *shine* all ther same."

"None of your sass, boy; this is no time for parley. I'll tell you why we have brought you here, and you can judge by our looks if we are men to be trifled with. We are what is known as the Press-Gang. Maybe you have heard of us—maybe you have not. We press men into the service of the Government, to fight down the Indians. To desert means death."

"Git out!" Little Bill exclaimed, contemptuously, as the other paused a moment, seemingly to note the effect of his words. "Don't try to stuff that kind of taffy down me. I know better. Shall I fotygraff ye? Yes, fer I kin do it, true ter nature. You're a gang o' ruffians, known as the Press-Gang, and a set of human fiends. You pounce upon men and force them to swear a horrible oath of alligiance to your band, or you kill them. Tom Ternerl refused, and he was found dead. Your victims are made to work, somewhere, wherever your den is, but what they work at, the Lord only knows. Guess you didn't know this much of your secret had leaked out, did you? Didn't know folks are beginnin' ter keep a sharp eye? Yes, I've heerd o' ther Press-Gang, an' so've others. An' no one don't allow that a man o' yer clan fights ag'in' ther red devils."

The captain listened to the boy's speech, attentively, but with a dark scowl in under his mask.

"You are laboring under a delusion," he returned with a turn on the heel. "But, you cannot fool us. You know what we want of you, I dare say. Your father, Phil Burnham, has been one of us for over a year, and we trusted him. But now we find that he has deserted and betrayed us. For a month we have been searching for him, but without avail. We have seen you go to Fort Alexander—you must tell us where Phil Burnham is hiding, that we may find him and put him to death. Speak! where is he?"

"I do not know!" Bill replied, firmly. "W. went to Fort Alexander to find if he was there. He has not been home for a month. My sister will tell you that."

"Bah! I'd b'lieve you, sooner than her. Women are all liars from infancy, up. We know your dad has not been home, for a watch has been kept upon your cabin, and only last night we paid your mother a visit and hung her up to a convenient limb, because she refused to divulge the secret. We *will* know the whereabouts of the traitor, so you had better shell out."

"I don't know where my father is; neither did my poor mother!" replied Bill, tears standing in his eyes, as he thought of his dear, kind mother, and the horrible knowledge that these human wolves had murdered her. Maolin sobbed and wept piteously.

"Don't tell me that, ycu young whelp!" the captain of the Press-Gang cried, fiercely. "You do know—you communicated to him when at Fort Alexander. Don't deny it; 'tis useless. You shall tell us, or we will first kill your squalling sister, and then yourself."

"Don't tell, Bill, if you know!" cried Maolin, bravely, a heroic light shining in her eyes. "We can but die."

"Neither will I tell 'em!" Bill said, grimly, "fer we don't know nothin' to tell. Kill me, you durned sbysters, if ye're bloodthirsty, but let Maolin alone."

"No, she shall die first!" cried Captain Coffin, savagely. "I give you five seconds to tell. *One!*"

And the ruffian held a cocked revolver at Maolin's head.

"*Two!*" will you tell?"

"I don't know!" faintly replied Little Bill, trembling from head to foot. "My God, Maolin, what can I do?"

"Nothing, Bill—only avenge me!" the brave-hearted girl replied, with a wonderful calmness, beyond her years. "You can tell them nothing."

"Four!" cried the ruffian; "quick, boy, 'tis your last chance to save your sister's life."

"Would to God I could, but I do not know dad's hiding-place!" the boy replied in a hoarse voice.

"Five!" There was the sharp report, and poor Maolin sunk back lifeless in the arms of her guards.

But the scene was not yet ended. With a wild, ringing yell, a horseman dashed straight down through the gorge where the ruffians were standing. Bill was torn from the grasp of his guards, and in a moment more the horseman and his rescued prize were gone out of sight, far down the ravine.

CHAPTER II.

TWO YEARS LATER—THE BUCKHORN.

Two years! Such is the lapse of time which occurs, ere we again renew acquaintance with the characters introduced in our first chapter.

Two years that had brought changes in Northern Dakota. Emigration had flooded in, here and there, to adorn and beautify, and although the territory was yet comparatively a wilderness, there were many pleasant scenes, where the colonists had located, and built homes that were by no means rude.

In two years Burnham's colony had become widely extended, with a gain of wealth and thrift everywhere, and although ignored by the map-makers, was a tract of settled country of no mean importance.

Upon a fertile and extensive prairie ocean the colony was situated, where timber and water were at hand, in quantities.

It boasted of a thrifty trading-post, named Squatterville, where commerce was carried on with the Indians, but of this more anon. All around the Post for miles rolled the grand majestic sea of emerald, with human habitations scattered here and there, and fertile ranches under tillage and growth.

In mid-prairie, with the scorching rays of the August sun pouring down upon his head and shoulders, crouched a youth of manly face and figure—crouching low in the prairie grass, which waved and rustled noisily in the breeze that blew aridly down from the north. He was, perhaps, eighteen years of age, with a well-developed figure, of medium height, in which were both grace and physical strength, and a face, which, though sunburned from long exposure to the sun, was good-looking.

We are not writing a mess of fiction, where every character of worth is to be made handsome as an Adonis; we choose rather from reality, and delineate our characters as they are in life, or were at the period of which we write, which was not long ago.

It was a plain, regular and classic face, which a sculptor might love to model after. All the features were faultless and well-rounded; the mouth firm and habitually set in a resolute expression; the forehead high from the heavy eyebrows to the roots of the curling brown hair. The eyes were brown, and brilliant—at times as sharp as those of a lynx, who can see further than any animal of the quadruped kind. No hair, except a very slight mustache, grew upon his face; a glance only was required to tell that he was older in wisdom of the world than in years.

His dress was buckskin from his moccasins to his hunting-shirt, all fancifully fringed with Indian bead-work; a slouch hat for his curls lay by his side on the grass, plumed with a drooping eagle's feather, and pinned up on one side with a pin with a device like a red hand, carved out of bone.

His arms consisted of belt-weapons of fine pattern and finish, while his rifle was one of Evans's best, and a repeater at that. Attached to his belt was a horn, from the head of a young deer, hollow and gold-mounted at one end.

This was the buckhorn from which the hero of our narrative drew his name. It was a horn of pure tenor tone, a single blast from which could be heard for miles over mountain or prairie.

Buckhorn Bill! I cannot make myself believe that I am taking for my hero that noble youth, who but a few months ago bade me adieu as he returned westward ho! to the land of his birth.

But it is of him, whose experience has been more eventful, perhaps, than that of half the young men on the border, that I write.

The prairie around him, as he crouched below the grass-tops, rolled off in undulating waves as far as eye could reach, dotted here and there with a *motte* of timber, or silvered with the sinuosity of a winding streamlet.

A few buffalo grazed peacefully away to the northwest, and a herd of antelopes were just visible on the cap of a distant billow; but nature drowsed on, as if naught but eternal rest and harmony were hers.

It was not the buffalo, neither was it the deer, which Buckhorn Bill was watching, and which had caused him to drop into the grass. There was little to be feared from them, and the young rover evidently directed but little thought or attention upon them. His eyes and whole mind were concentrated elsewhere.

From where he crouched, the land billowed sharply off on the western side into a prairie ravine or valley of considerable depth but very narrow, which was one of those furrows in the face of nature we so often and unexpectedly chance upon in the western prairies. It ran for some miles in either direction, and you would not have suspected its existence until you stumbled, as it were, right into it.

Riding leisurely through its bottom in a westerly direction, were two horsemen, both of them Indians, and of the Sioux nation, as was apparent to the young watcher at a glance. They wore war-paint upon their faces, and it was evident that they were out on a raid after horses or food.

"It is Red Nose and Long Death!" muttered Bill, a dark scowl coming over his face, at some bitter recollection.

"Where can they be going, alone and unaccompanied by their warriors? Reckon there's sum deviltry afoot, or else I've lost my reckoning. They're following this hidden ravine, and avoiding the prairie."

While he spoke, the two chiefs reined in their horses, and gazed directly up toward where he was crouching.

He quickly dropped flat, but was too late. They had caught a glimpse of the swaying grass, and announced their discovery by a couple of inquiring grunts.

Lying flat, Buckhorn Bill carefully laid his rifle aside, and drew his revolvers, while he waited the issue. He had no doubt but that the savages would come up to investigate, and he was prepared to do the country a favor by dropping the red butchers, one by one.

But to his great surprise, they came not. This caused him to make a careful reconnoissance, and he made the discovery that they were gone!

Whither or how, he knew not. On horseback, surely, for their horses were gone, but he had not heard them move.

"Well, this is another link in the chain of mystery, which I am devoting my life to break and unravel!" the youth muttered, sitting upright, and rubbing the sweat from his face, with his hand. "Phew! the smiles of that sun up yonder are getting rather too warm for this business, and I opine I'd better strike for shade. Don't suppose there's any enemies around."

To satisfy himself on this subject, before exposing himself, he raised his slouch hat a little way above the top of the grass on the muzzle of his rifle.

Ping! there was a sharp, spiteful report of a rifle, and a bullet cut away the handsome plume like a knife.

"Too bad!" Bill muttered, picking up the feather, and repinning it to his hat. "'Ruther they'd 'a' punched a hole in my hat, ca'se how Jessie Latimer give it to me to remember her by. Guess according

to that shot, that it ain't healthy for one to show one's self."

For several minutes Buckhorn Bill sat, and listened. He could hear no one approaching: silence brooded over the great plains.

"Spect that wasn't an Injun, nohow, for 'twar too straight a shot fer one o' ther red rascallions. I could just like to know what kind of an indervidual hed ther cheek ter spit death at me. Can it be that any of the accursed Press-Gang of Captain Coffin are laying fer me? Ha! the devils ought to know by this time that it is death to fool around me! I've perforated at least a dozen of 'em through ther top story, and still Bill Burnham's score ain't full—a score ag'in' 'em what 'll last as long as this Captain Coffin and his Press-Gang exists.

"Maybe it is ther fools, ag'in, thinkin' they've got me as snug as a bug in a rug."

The young Scourge laughed in his grim, peculiar way, as he restored his revolvers to his belt, and took up his handsome rifle.

For the past two years, since he had lost his beloved mother and sister by these border outlaws, Bill Burnham had known no permanent home except the forest and prairie; had lived for nothing except vengeance upon his enemies—the destroyers of his once happy home. For the Burnham ranch he had put into other hands, well knowing that his wild spirit would never bear confinement to stock-raising or agricultural pursuits. He was well known to Captain Coffin and his gang, having proven himself a remorseless foe to them. Time and again had they trapped after him, and planned for his capture, but he had ever with him the wit and power to escape.

That it was the Press-Gang who were now besieging him, he was not positive, yet he had but little doubt of it, for the reason that he had cause to believe them in the vicinity. It was to learn the truth of the report that he had ridden down from Squatterville.

"Tain't Red Nose nor Long Death," he muttered, "and tharfore it's the Press-Gang. Wonder if—"

He did not finish the sentence.

A rustling in the grass but a little ways off, arrested his attention, and he again bent forward in a crouching attitude, listening intently.

Evidently some one was crawling through the grass, which all over the prairie, had grown belt high, and was as dry as powder. Who it was Buckhorn was unable to tell, but he held himself in readiness to greet either friend or foe, for some intuition seemed to tell him that this was no foe approaching, with so much noise.

"Dern it!" he heard a voice mutter at last; "ef thar ain't ernuther uv them confounded spiders! Thet makes six hundred, even, thet I've found within ther last hour. Ther grass aire full on 'em; likewise full o' human spiders. Reckon this old sarge o' Paris checked one o' them pesky galoots' baggage fer Salt river. Wonder who 'twar the pesky loafers popped at over in this direction? Shouldn't be surprised ef thar's ernuther hen-pecked parson like myself, abroad on these prairies. Oh, Lordy, why did I ever run away from my dad and mam, an' cum out ter missionize ter ther heathen? Reckon my mission's contained more lead than religyun an' l'arnin'—with an audible chuckle. "Don't suppose I've converted many Injun souls, but I've bin mitey handy in makin' items fer obituary editors. Gol dangnation! ef thar ain't ernuther spider! Never see'd 'em so thick, except when I got married ter old Jemima Spiltover, an' she throw'd a hull table-load o' kitchen utensils—mostly spiders—at my pericranium. Hello!"

The speaker had crept along so rapidly in concert motion with his tongue, that before he was aware of it he had brought his countenance in contact with the pistols of Buckhorn Bill.

"Hello!" the young Scourge echoed, also evidently surprised. "Old Elephant, as sure's I'm a livin' koon."

"Yes, thet's ther identical figurative deskription uv yer 'umble servant, ye galoot," returned the other. "I thort et war a Press-Gang-ite."

"So did I," replied Bill, with a laugh. "Didn't expect to find you down in these 'ere parts, no more'n I'd have expected old Sittin' Bull. What you after, Elephant?"

"After? Waal, I'm originally in these parts as a missionary, to save Injun souls, an' civilize the heathen, but, at present my leisure moments are devoted ter ther inquisitive business."

Old Elephant outwardly was a curiosity even on the border.

He was of about the average hight of men, but very fat. Every part of his body was obese. His face reminded one of the countenance of a full moon. Judging from appearances, he must have weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred and seventy-five pounds. Yet, wonderful to relate, he was as nimble of foot and dextrous of movement as a man who did not weigh half that amount.

All along the Dakota frontier he was widely known as a scout and Indian-fighter of note; he had distinguished himself as a brave and intrepid scout in many battles, and was universally admired and respected by all frontiersmen. His smooth, good-natured, fat face was indicative of his open heart and mild temperament; yet he was a deadly enemy to the red-man and their worse brethren, the white outlaws.

With Buckhorn Bill he was an especial favorite, for the Boy Scourge had found him possessed of much knowledge and good-judgment, and a willing friend in an hour of need. And the fat scout evidently was equally an admirer of the youth whose life was one for vengeance.

"Yas," he continued, a few moments subsequent to his last remark. "I'm follerin' ther trail o' inquisitiveness. Or, in other words, tryin' ter find out w'at's ter be found out concernin' Captain Coffin an' his Press-Gang."

"Just what I've bin tryin' ter do myself, and failed," said Bill.

"Waal, thet ain't much ter be wondered at, when et war only by accident thet I found out about it. A feiler might have searched a lifetime without findin' out."

"Then you've a clew?"

"You bet yer salvation I have! I know what this Press-Gang is fer, an' what becomes o' ther men pressed into service. I know what aire all the mysterious lights thet aire seen on dark nights on the prairie, an' everything else, except the den of these devils."

"And what is the secret, Elephant?"

"Listen and I'll tell ye. These Press Grang-ites belong to a great distilling organization, which long has been a secret to the Government, which produces illicit whisky, and smuggles it up to the Northern Pacific, from whence it is forwarded eastward. These men are known as Moonshiners, and have their quarters somewhere within or near the scope of Burnham's colony."

CHAPTER III.

SQUATTERVILLE—A FLOWER FAIRY IN TROUBLE.

SQUATTERVILLE, the only post of Burnham's colony, and indeed the nearest collection of habitations known by any name, short of old Fort Alexander, was rather a pretty place, despite the fact that it was the home, principally, of squatters, who would not pay rents nor do unnecessary work. They had concentrated here, as if by unanimous consent, and built their little frame shanties, and the Government probably thought their trespassing, as long as the country was so sparsely settled, of little or no account.

The enterprise of a steam sawmill had been started, for timber was plenty, and thereby a means of easy building had been provided; consequently the place had become a village of a score of dwellings,

aside from a couple of stores, a block-house, and the aforesaid sawmill.

All around the Post, as it was more frequently called, were many thrifty ranches and fine farm-houses, for riches were there scattered among the colonists, and they took pride in adorning and beautifying their homes.

But with these we may have little to do.

Under the shadow, almost, of the great steam saw-mill, whose busy hum could be heard night and day, was built a modern two-story cottage, of much more pretentious finish than its neighbors. It stood upon the bank of the darkly-flowing little river, down which logs were floated from the nor'western timber region; and before it stretched a pretty lawn, shaded with trees and ornamented by shrubs and beds of blooming, fragrant flowers.

A placid-faced, matronly-looking little woman sat in the front doorway of this charming little home one hot August day—the same one, by the way, on which Buckhorn Bill and his fat friend, Old Elephant, had met upon the prairie. She was sewing, and though seemingly preoccupied, her eyes occasionally gazed off toward a dark stretch of timber, a mile or so beyond the river, with an expression of anxiety and expectancy upon her face. She was but a plain, common-looking woman, of say forty years, yet something about her was interesting, something that was good, pure, and of the kindest.

Busily the deft fingers plied the needle, as the hot day wore toward a close. Evidently the little matron was watching for some one's coming, and as the night drew on, and a great mass of thunder-clouds rolled up in giant piles in the western heavens, she manifested great uneasiness.

"Why don't Pearl come?" she asked herself, over and over again. "She well knows she ought not to stay so long—and the storm coming on, too. If Bill *should* come—"

She did not finish the sentence, but compressed her lips with rather a forbidding grimace, as there was a wild, girlish hurrah, and then a horse and rider came splashing through the river, amid a storm of spray, and, a moment later, the Pearl in question stood before her elder companion, wet from top to toe, and a very fairy queen of flowers and ferns.

It was a graceful, well-chiseled form, that of this girl, as was revealed by the clinging, water-soaked garments, that sat closely to her shape; it was a pretty, sweet face that peeped from beneath the brim of the broadbrim straw hat, which was heavy with its loads of flower-wreaths—a pretty face, delicately carved, and tinged both with the beauty of robust health and the merciless kisses of the sun: a face one could worship for its purity alone, if not for its roguish sweetness. The eyes and eyebrows of brown and the hair of chestnut shade harmonized well with the face; the lips of cherry's ripest hue, the haughty little chin—all combined to make up the pretty Pearl of the Prairies.

The grave look on the face of the woman in the doorway, could but vanish before the roguish smile of the girl—the sixteen year old woman who was *the* girl, and pride of the Squattervillians.

"Well, Pearl!" the tones were not angry, but chiding—"have you come at last?"

"Yes, Aunty, dear; don't you see I have—don't you see?" and the little white hand patted "Aunty" under the chin.

"Oh! I've had just the most glorious ride you can imagine—and such hosts of flowers as I found; and I saw an Indian, too, Aunty, making for me, and you bet I skeddaddled! Poor Pet," with a wry glance at the sorry-looking chub of an Indian pony, who had curled down upon the edge of the lawn—"I guess he won't want another race for a week."

"You are a naughty girl to stay away so long, and give me such uneasiness, Pearl. It is not safe for you to go alone upon the prairies, and in the woods—"

"Pooh! Aunty! Please don't annoy your darling with a curtain lecture. You know I and Chub can

show our heels to any danger. There, now, that's a dear, so don't say any more, but hunt Mother Hubbard's dog a bone, while I go put Chub away, for when I come back I have something of importance to say;" and just here the sweet face became pale and sober, as the girl walked away. She had her own way in all things, at Prescott cottage, had this little Queen of the Wilderness; her childish imperiousness was perhaps too often humored, because they all knew that Pearl was a pet, and good and true.

And so Aunty Prescott rose and laid aside her work; hurried into the cosy little back kitchen, and laid the spread, and had a plain but substantial repast awaiting ere my queen returned. She came at last, and dropped wearily into a chair, with a sigh as if the world and the world's cares were too great for her to combat with.

"You have been overdoing, and are all tired out, child!" said Mrs. Prescott, as she bustled about. "Does your head ache?—shall I put a wet cloth around it, deary?"—and maternal solicitude was in the bearing of this good woman.

Pearl was not her child, but a child of her own flesh could not have filled Pearl's place in her love.

"No! no! Aunty, you can do nothing in that line, for I am not tired nor does my head ache. I have simply been worrying."

"*Worrying!* Land of goodness! *you* worrying, pet?" the good woman exclaimed, in astonishment. "What is the matter, pray?—what ever causes *you* to worry, with your gay, gladsome spirit."

"Oh! the gay can have trouble as well as the sober, Aunty, but they sometimes hide their affliction under a deceptive mask of smiles. The rich, the poor, the wicked and the righteous all must experience trouble and worry."

"Ah! yes, child, your words are only too true. None can escape the scavenger of time—trouble. But what in the world has put you into such a serious fit?"

"Oh! Aunty, I have discovered that I am in no way related to you—that Bill Burdelle is not my father—that I am merely a trespasser upon your hospitality. I need not tell you how I found it out—it is enough that it is true. Oh! Aunty, what secret is there about my birth and life, that you have kept hidden from me?"

She had risen to her feet, and stood proudly erect, her eyes shining, her lips parted, her face suffused with a strange, pained flush.

Mrs. Prescott had also become flushed, and shrunk away beneath the young girl's accusing gaze, trembling in every limb.

"Pearl! Pearl!" she said, deprecatingly, as the fairy was about to continue—"don't! *don't!* You know not what you are saying. Who has been stuffing your brain with such utter nonsense?"

"It isn't nonsense, Aunty—for I shall still call you so—it isn't nonsense, and you know it, and I know it, and God knows it. Acknowledge the truth—you are not my aunt, are you?"

Mrs. Prescott hesitated, compressing her lips tightly. To acknowledge this was like running a knife through her sensitive, motherly heart.

"No, I am not," she articulated, finally, in a faint tone.

"I knew it—nor any relation of mine?" Pearl pursued, eagerly.

"Oh! child, don't ask me."

"Yes, yes, you must tell me the truth."

"Oh! God, this is torture. No, Pearl, I am in no way related to you, except as a companion."

"Which makes no difference, aunty dear, for I shall love you all the same," and the girl threw her arms impulsively around the elder woman's neck, lovingly. "I only wanted to know the truth, and you cannot blame me. I am well satisfied without questioning you, that Bill Burdelle is not my father. Every instinct in my nature rebels against him as a parent; and besides, I have other grounds on which to base my knowledge. But, for you, dear Aunty, I

would to-night bid this place good-by, forever, and go out into the world, where I could make a name for myself. You know the names of my father and mother, Aunt, and where they live, do you not? Oh! tell me, truthfully."

"No, as God is my judge, I do not, child. I know nothing of them—whether they are alive or dead."

"Does Bill Burdelle?"

"Probably; but, if so, he has never communicated such intelligence to me. He is fierce, vindictive, as you know, and I have never dared to pry into his affairs."

"You certainly must know something about me?"

"No—nothing. I was paid to come to Burdelle's cabin, when you were but a child, to care for and assume guardianship over you. I knew you were not Burdelle's child, for to my knowledge he had never been married. Besides, a glance told me that you were no child of his."

Poor Pearl listened with her face pillowed on her arm which rested over the back of the chair; listened with tears dropping from her pretty eyes, for this was an awful realization to her bright young spirit, that she was nobody's child.

She had ever been in a measure a little proud, even to think that Bill Burdelle was her father, for, though rough and brutal by nature, he was a popular and influential man throughout the colony, where he had dealings with whites and reds. He was a trader by occupation, exchanging guns, ammunition, provisions, clothing and whisky for furs and Indian work; it was a circulated joke in Squatterville, that for every gallon of whisky he sold, he drank two himself. He was a man of contradictory traits of character; villainous and unscrupulous in many things; honest, upright and fair in others; a man whose career had made him equally feared and respected.

His coming home to the cottage was always dreaded, for he never failed to be more or less intoxicated, and if everything was not to suit him, a terrible storm ensued.

Pearl in these times, was the only one who could quiet him; a few words from her lips had the effect to subdue his passion and make him ashamed of himself.

"You will not go away, Pearl?" Mrs. Prescott said, tenderly. "Your home here is pleasant, generally, and you know you have many friends."

"I know, Aunt, but it will not be long ere gossip will call me a nobody; I will be pointed out as a thing of doubtful origin. Then, I should want to die. If I were to go elsewhere, I would try to drown out the past as best I could."

"But see how many friends would miss you! Then there is one I think would miss you more than all the rest."

"You mean Buckhorn Bill?"

"Yes. He is a fine young fellow."

"True, Bill is good—and nice; but really, aunt, it never quite seemed to me that we should ever be any nearer to each other than friends. I don't think that Buckhorn Bill will ever marry, at least, not until he has completed what he calls his score of vengeance. And that will be a long time, for it will not be an easy task for him to battle off the mysterious Captain Coffin and his men."

"I know. But has he never spoken to you of love or hinted at such a thing?"

"No! of course not. The idea of two babies like us talking of love and marriage! Of course I like Bill—all the girls do—and Bill likes me; so if he pops the question to me, very likely I shall pop back!" and with a merry laugh, and seemingly forgetful of her recent trouble, Pearl ran away up-stairs to arrange her disordered dress and brush her hair, preparatory to tea. While Aunt Prescott inwardly thanked God that the trouble had taken no deeper root in Pearl's young heart.

She came down, later, looking so fresh and sweet in her summer lawn attire, that Aunt could but half smother her with kisses.

"You are looking so lovely, child, and I am glad of it, for there comes your fath—I mean Bill Burdelle, accompanied by a young gentleman."

"Yes, and do you know who that young gentleman is, Aunt?" replied Pearl, her lip curling with contempt.

"No; I do not think I have ever seen him, my dear."

"Well, I have then, and seen all I want to of him, too. It's that impudent loafer whom they call Royal Ralph, and the same one who but a week ago insulted me at the party in the block-house. He hangs around the village and is a declared nuisance. What ever is causing Bill Burdelle to bring him here, I do not know. I for one will not see him, for I shall go to my room and not come down till he goes away."

"Yes, child, you had better go," said Mrs. Prescott, anxiously; "for Bill is 'full' again to night, and I like not the looks of his companion. He has a general sneakish look, and 'villain' is written on his evil face. I have a foreboding of something wrong which is to happen."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RED RIFLE TEAM—THE MYSTERIOUS BLACK HAND.

NIGHT'S shadows were creeping over the prairie with rapid strides. Along the heavens rolled great masses of sullen black clouds, and the mutterings of thunder became louder and hoarser. Occasionally a tiny zigzag streak would lighten the gathering gloom; then the wind would sweep along with a strong puff.

All the probabilities of a stormy night were upon the face of the sky, yet the rain for some time failed to come, except in occasional huge drops.

Apparently, judging by his facial expression, this was not to the satisfaction of a lone horseman, who was pushing his way over the prairie mounted upon a handsome animal, which had the appearance of being nearly done for, as it had but little ambition left, and was dripping with sweat.

The rider in question was a man of some forty years, very stout of build and attired in the rich garb of a citizen of the more Eastern States, despite the fact that he was a Westerner. Everything about his make-up, from his patent-leather boots to his massive gold chain, diamond shirt-pin, and glossy silk hat, betokened a man who was wealthy, and not used to manual labor.

As he is to play a part in our life-drama, we may as well introduce him as Judge Fowler, managing agent for the lands which were included in what was known as Burnham's colony. A word of explanation may not be amiss.

Philip Burnham had taken up the land individually from the Government, and from distant States had brought colonists to purchase and settle a portion of it. The tract being immense, a large share of it yet remained unsettled. Therefore Burnham had appointed this Judge Fowler, a man of some wealth and liberal education, as assistant in helping him dispose of the lands. Upon the strange disappearance of Burnham, two years before, Fowler had found himself placed wholly in control of the property—as manager for the only heir, who was our Buckhorn Bill. He had built him a home and land-office adjacent to the Burnham farm-house (which was a matter of three miles from Squatterville, and leased out to a family of Ohioans), and here carried on the business and lived the life of a bachelor. He was seldom visited by the young heir of all the property, and so had things pretty much to his own liking.

He was not a handsome man, for his form was rather too stout, and his smoothly-shaven face too fat. Yet he was quite popular, and often was consulted concerning law matters, as he possessed a smattering of Blackstone, and other legal authorities.

What brought him out so far from his residence, with a stormy night staring him in the face, is for us to find out as we progress.

He evidently was not in the best of humor, for he goaded his jaded animal on mercilessly, while he occasionally swore roundly as he peered around him into the quickening gloom.

"The devil take the fellows, and the storm, too!" he growled, as he drew rein upon a loftier billow than he had yet attained. "If I get soaked by this rain, I'll lick a certain rascal until he can't sit a saddle. I don't see where on earth the camp can be."

He blew his nose, vigorously, and was about to start on again, when a low, peculiar laugh arrested his movements.

"Hello! who the deuce was that I heard laughing?" he exclaimed, looking sharply around, with a start. "Hello there—who are you?"

There came no answer except the dismal moan of the wind over the prairie. The wind was blowing stronger, too, and the thunder was louder in its hoarse mutterings. The storm would soon burst forth.

"Confound it, I am getting as nervous as an old cat, and imagine I hear things when I don't. Go along, you beast, and we'll try and find some place to shelter ourselves."

The horse struck into a feeble trot, and they descended the swell to the more level prairie. Suddenly the animal shied, and nearly dumped the Judge out of the saddle; but he saw the cause of the affright, and saved himself.

A blood-red rocket had shot up into the gloom of the night, and after describing a graceful curve, descended slowly, and burst into a shower of ten red stars, which did not die out until they reached the grass.

The rocket had ascended to the west of the night-rider, and in this direction he turned his horse.

"I'm on the right course, at least, thank goodness!" he muttered, "but that came up a couple of miles off, I should judge. Come! Come! go on, Racer, and we'll soon get there."

As if deriving some encouragement from the words, the tired animal sped along as fast as its wasted strength would permit, while the judge kept his eyes riveted upon the gloom ahead, for ere long he hoped to espy a camp-fire light to guide him.

The rain continued to fall in occasional big drops; it acted as if it were holding off for the traveler to reach his destination.

Sooner than he expected he saw a fire-light gleaming down before him, in the depths of a prairie valley, and ere many minutes he was challenged by a picket guard.

"Hello! halt! Who comes there?" shouted a stentorian voice, followed by the click! click of a gun-lock.

"Oh! it's all right—it's I—Judge Fowler, of Squatterville," was the assurance, and the horseman continued to ride forward.

"Halt!" the guard bellowed. "If you value your life, you'll hold up, till you are bidden advance."

"Halt it is, then, you cussed fool," announced the judge, irreverently. "I don't see what you need be so durned 'fraid about, when it's only one man."

"Our motto is, 'It's allus safer to be on the sure side!'" was the response.

Then there was a painful silence of several moments, during which the thunder growled more ominously, and the drops pattered down faster.

"Curse the rain! curse the sentinel!" grumbled the judge. "If this water ruins my hat, I'll thrash thunder out of him—I will, sure's my name is—"

"Come ahead, old bu'stover," here yelled the voice of the guard! "Ride straight through the willows, and you'll find the captain and the rest of the boys, thar."

Fowler accordingly rode through the willows as directed, and arrived in camp in safety.

There was a camp-fire blazing brightly, around which were gathered nine men, either sitting on logs, or reclining or smoking their pipes. For the

most part they were young men, the oldest not exceeding thirty-five, while the leader, who was evidently the youngest, was about twenty-three. He was a fine-looking young fellow, with a frank, honest face, dark eyes, and brown hair and mustache. He, as were his companions likewise, was clad in a buckskin hunting costume, colored blood red, and black slouch hat with red plumes.

Closely stacked near by were nine of Remington's latest improved repeating rifles, the stocks of which were painted red in unison with the costumes of the rangers.

Considerable surprise was manifested, among these men, as they saw the old judge ride into camp and dismount, but they spoke no word indicative of this surprise.

"Good evenin'!" the traveler said, as he drew closer to the fire, and took off his fashionable silk hat to see if the falling tears of Jupiter Pluvius had damaged it. "Look's as if we are in for a big storm, does it not?"

"I should say so," replied the captain of the band, dryly. "What ever brought you out here, this far, and all prospects of a tearin' night? Who be you, anyhow?"

"Eh? did you not receive warning that I was coming?" demanded the judge, in amazement.

"No! we received no warning; indeed, we know you not, being strangers in these parts."

Fowler nodded and smiled understandingly.

"Yes, I know," he rejoined. "But, you see I am a new member, recently added in. That accounts for your not knowing me."

"Hum, yes," assented the captain, while he exchanged inquiring glances with his comrades. "Who sent you?"

"The P. of the B. W. R.!" replied Fowler. "I can give you the shake, if you desire."

"No need for that, I guess," was the reply. "I suppose you are the bearer of news, eh?"

"I am, if you are the Captain Coffin I take you to be."

"Yes, you may call me Captain Coffin, although, of course, you understand that is not my real name. What news do you bring?"

"Some dispatches in that cursed secret cipher, out of which I can make neither head nor tail. I was down at Fort Alexander, recently, and the President induced me to become a member, which I did, by receiving the initiation. The President then gave me the dispatches, and ordered me to bring them to you."

"Ah! that's good news. I have been looking for orders. By this time there must be a goodly stock of 'moonshine' on hand, ready for transportation. I should now be at the head-quarters, only that Black Snake Nelson, the usual leader of the men, here, is unwell, and ordered in. Have you the dispatches handy? I'd like to look them over."

"Certainly," replied the judge, importantly, as he produced a well-filled wallet, from which he extracted a large document sealed with red wax, and addressed to Captain Coffin. "Here, sir, is what I was commissioned to bring you. And, now, what accommodations have you for a fellow, until morning?"

"Yonder are a couple of tents by the willows," said Coffin, indicating a couple of canvas marquees near by. "You can find shelter under them, with the earth for a bed. That's what we men call accommodations. But, hold! would it not be safer for you to return to Squatterville under cover of darkness? This prairie is full of scouts and detectives who are laying for us, and to see you leaving our camp, might arouse suspicion."

"Hang the suspicion!" growled the judge, making for one of the tents, as fast as he could waddle. "Don't think I'm fool enough to ride all the way home through a soaking rain, do you, and spoil my hat and best suit? No, sir-ee! Money's money, nowadays, an' a man has to be saving."

Accordingly, the messenger was left to enter the

Handwritten text in a secret cipher, consisting of various symbols, letters, and numbers, arranged in several lines. The text is written in a cursive, somewhat chaotic style, typical of a secret message. The symbols include letters like 'X', 'I', 'E', 'S', 'K', 'M', 'N', 'O', 'Y', 'Z', 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'J', 'L', 'P', 'Q', 'R', 'T', 'U', 'V', 'W', 'Y', 'Z', and numbers like '1', '2', '3', '4', '5', '6', '7', '8', '9', '0'. There are also various symbols like circles, crosses, and lines.

smaller tent, and soon his loud snoring proclaimed that he was wrapped in oblivion.

"Now, then!" said Captain Ned Stockton, with a satisfied smile, "what do you think of it? Didn't I tell you our coming was not for nothing? The Red Rifle Team has struck a field where both ingenuity, craft and good shooting will be brought into play. This old codger who has so opportunely stumbled down among us, believes us to be the accursed Press-Gang, and that I am the inhuman Captain Coffin. Here we have in our possession dispatches from the president of this whisky gang—perhaps the most gigantic one upon the Western border. Now, there lays before us a path of duty which we must follow. Let's open the dispatch; that may throw some light upon the subject; we may learn where this illicit whisky distillery is located."

"Had we not better wait till we are alone?" asked Hal Everette, glancing suspiciously toward the tent.

"No!" Captain Ned replied, quickly; "we must open it now, so as to avoid suspicion. Go see if the old traitor is really asleep."

One of the Team accordingly cautiously approached and peeped into the tent. Yes, the worthy (or unworthy) judge, was lying prostrate—Morpheusized beyond a doubt.

Upon learning this, Stockton tore open the wrapper, and spread the message out upon his knee. As Fowler had said, it was written in cipher—in an incongruous mass of "hen-tracks." (On this page is a copy of it, as it came into the possession of the Red Rifle Team.)

"There is your secret cipher," said Ned Stockton, with a chuckle. "If any o' you've had education enough to read hieroglyphics, go ahead and tell us what she says."

"Dang it, I don't believe any one can read them scrawls," replied Dick Reade. "Nor i don't believe there's any sense in the matter."

"There is undoubtedly a meaning which would be readily understood by this Captain Coffin," said Stockton, closely scrutinizing the document, while he ran his fingers through his straight, Indian-like hair. "There is knowledge in them scrawls that we must acquire."

"Let me see: the first is a letter C. I notice that letters may be found all the way through. Hum, yes, Cap-t, and a period. That means Captain. Coff-in—Coffin. Ha! Captain Coffin. So far so good. I-l-l-i-c-i-t, illicit; w-b-i-s-k-y, whisky. *Illicit Whisky*. See! there's more here too. L-o-o-n; that ends the letters."

"And your information, also," laughed Hal Everette. "You've had your trouble for your pains."

"I guess I'm snagged, sure enough," said Stockton, grimly. "But I ain't at all discouraged yet. If one could make out these hen-tracks, the right message would be forthcoming."

"Maybe the old bu'stover knows," suggested Fen Robinson. "Supposin' we go and induce him to disgorge."

"No! no! I'll wager my rifle he cannot read the mess, or he would have been more profuse with his tongue. No, he is ignorant, and guess we shall have to give up stuck. We'll keep this paper, however; some time it may come in play."

So saying, he was about to refold it, when suddenly a large black hand reached over his shoulder from behind, seized the paper, clutched it between the talon-like fingers, and withdrew. With cries of wonder, all gazed around, but the mysterious thief was nowhere in sight!

CHAPTER V.

PICKING OFF PRAIRIE PIRATES—ON THE LAKE SHORE.

BUCKHORN BILL was not surprised at the strange revelation made by Old Elephant, as together they crouched in the tall prairie grass near the brink of the bank, which looked off into the deep chasm or prairie valley. He had been prepared to hear almost anything of a criminal nature concerning these

men, whom he had sworn to kill off, one by one, until the Press-Gang and its advocates were a non-entity—were things of the past rather than of the present.

"I have suspected as much all along, Elephant," he replied, thoughtfully. "I have known that deviltry was aback of it all, yet was unable to come to any definite conclusion. The durned skunks have kept their secret well an' ef they're as sharp on the guard, we may as well give over the affair to another generation. Where do they hold out?"

"I ken't tell you, my gay buck, but ef we ken't trail out that much, after knowin' w'at we do, we orter be eternally chawed up by crockygaters. We know that these infernal imps aire whisky distillers; it remains fer us ter find out *whar* they coop. Shall we work together, or shall we go in on our own individual, three-pronged hooks?"

"Wal, I reckon thet we'd better do each our own fliggerin' and slaughterin'," replied the young Scourge, with a grim smile. "I reckon we'd get along 'bout as well. You've got your own object—mine is one of vengeance, and I shall pursue it to the death. The spirits of my dead mother and little Maolin call upon me in every hour. I am constantly haunted by their voices, and know they plead to be avenged. God may judge me, w'en it's all over, but I reckon 'twon't be very hard for riddin' His fair earth ov a recognized curse."

"Dunno how that'll be, boyee, but darn my donkey's capacity fer fodder ef I blame ye. Yer perfect justifiable, an' hayr's w'at kin help ye wi' a strong heart. S'pose ye'll continny around these parts?"

"Yes—until my vengeance is fulfilled, and the Press-Gang and these illicit producers of hell-fire are extinct. Then I may perhaps change my life, although I shall ever have a strong antipathy to ruffians and ruffianism. The oath I swore over little Maolin's grave was taken deep to heart—my hatred for evil-doers knows no qualification."

And the stern, terrible glitter that came into the eyes of the speaker, was more than assurance that his words were not idly spoken or meaningless. He was deeply in earnest in his retributive work—imbued with a burning thirst for vengeance which would not, as yet, be appeased.

"I suppose there's some o' the Press-Gang in the vicinity, now, eh?" he continued, peering around, but taking care not to expose his head above the grass-tops.

"Yas, ye're jest on ther right trail ter Biblical truthfulness," Elephant replied, with a chuckle. "Thar's ther hull family uv 'em, scattered around, an' they've got an idea thet they kin snatch you bald-headed, fer et's known among 'em thet ye're hayr. Thet's why I tumbled down hayr—ter mingle my pills wi' yourn in ther great work o' riddin' thes community uv a contagion—a great cavor-tin' catalogue o' sin an' sorrer. Bully chance fer sharp-shutin', an' I propose thet we open ther performance wi' an overture."

Saying which the fat scout thrust his head above the grass, and peered over the dun waving prairie. But Buckhorn Bill pulled him back, just in time to escape a volley of flying bullets.

"Down!" cried Bill. "'Tis death to expose yourself thet way. No use o' tryin' ter fight 'em in that fashion, fer they've got the top drop on us. Little more'n' you'd bin' a stiff."

"Yas! yas!" muttered Old Elephant, grimly, as he rubbed one of his ears which a bullet had scraped; "ther pesky devils are's sassy as a swarm o' disturbed hornets. Never see'd a set o' roughs that would equal them for impudence and pure cussedness."

"What less could you expect of men whose lives are ruled by that soul-curse of the age—whisky?" replied Bill, bitterly. "As much as I love my life, Elephant, if I could see whisky and all intoxicating liquors banished forever from use, I'd say plug it to me—I'm ready ter turn in. Yes, I would, for I loathe the very name of whisky."

The reports of several rifles now rung out upon the air, loud and spiteful—nor were they far away.

"Them was shots from the Press-Gang's pop-guns!" said Buckhorn Bill, decisively. "Ther's other lurkers around, besides us. I'm going to see what's up."

"Ain't goin' ter stick yer head up fer a target, aire ye?"

"No. I ain't so fond o' gettin' perforated. I've got something here that gets away with that—a dexterously-contrived invention of mirrors, by which I can, by lying in the grass and holding it up above the grass on top of a ramrod, see far over the prairie.

On producing it from his haversack, it proved to be a number of small mirrors, fitted by angles into the square shape of a box. It had a hollow depth in one side, and on the right of this was a small hole, in which to insert the ramrod.

Buckskin Bill reviewed it a few moments, with pride; then dropping back upon the grass, he raised it upon the ramrod of his gun into the air, at arm's-length.

He gave but a swift glance into the hollow, then passed it to Old Elephant.

"You see! there's a dozen heads lookin' out o' the grass. I guess we've got a chance fer rifle-practice."

While the fat scout was gazing in wonder into the ingenious contrivance, Buckhorn carefully raised his rifle, so that it laid along the grass-tops, without exposing himself, and then remembering the location where he had last seen a pirate's head, he allowed the weapon to point, and fired.

An answering yell came back, and an exclamation from Old Elephant:

"Gentle zephyrs from purgatory!" he ejaculated, wonderingly—"that war one o' ther purtiest shots on record. Never see'd anything ter beat it, nor their likes uv this glass. Et aire an eighth wonder uv the world, an' no mistake. However did ye know whar thet blasted pirate war, boy?"

"It was only guess-work," Bill replied, with a smile. "Did I pretty near make a stiff, then, eh?"

"Yes—great zephyrs, yes. Knocked a feller inter an eternal picnie, a-whoopin'. Reckon he thort thet a cyclone hed struck him broadside. Now, let this old deposit of fat try an' see if he ken't do ditto."

"No; you keep watch an' locate 'em fer me, while I give 'em a kind of jerky sensation about ther heart."

Elephant accordingly raised the glass above the grass-top and through it scanned the plain.

"Quick! Just back of your head is one o' the varmints," he whispered, and the next instant Buckhorn Bill's trusty repeater rung out sharply. This time there were two death-yells, and a cry of great astonishment from Old Elephant.

"Wonder o' wonders! W'at means this, Billiam? Did yer shute yer cannon in two directions?"

"No! I simply aimed where you told me. Why?—what caused those two yells?"

"What? Gentle zephyrs thet fanned the brow uv old King Emanuel! Why, ye jest knocked two mortals inter ther river Jordan, quicker'n a cat ked say me-eow. Both fell at ther same time."

"That is strange," Bill said, lowering his rifle. "My bullet could not possibly have cared for more than one rough. Some one else may be trying target practice at ther expense o' these whisky-wolves."

"But thar warn't only one crack, Billiam—how about *that*?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear the report of another rifle. Looks a little strange. The fellers ain't playin' possum, aire they?"

"No—not thet galoot, anyhow. 'Twar a Jenny-wine piece o' deathly vocalism, that of his'n, an' I'll bet my past history thet he's up at Jordan now, waitin' fer ther ferry-boat ter tote him across. But ef thar's any truth in ther Bible, he'll hev one

good time a-waitin', 'ca'se ther doorkeeper won't let him in."

"Then we are not friendless and alone among these human badgers. Let's have the glass, and I will take a squint."

The valuable little contrivance was accordingly surrendered, and the Boy Scourge (for by this name he was well known upon the plains of northern Dakota) scanned their surroundings with a quick glance. While he was looking he saw a rifle-barrel and muzzle lying along on top of the waving ocean of grass; then heard a yell of anguish, and saw a prairie pirate fall back lifeless.

"Ha! another of those mysterious death-shots without a report! By Jove! this is even beyond my power of comprehension!" Bill exclaimed, lowering his glass. "What do you think of it, Elephant?"

"I reckon thet thar's only one way ter it, Bucky," the fat scout replied, grimly. "Thet durned ole critter the Durnhamites call Death-Shadow is abroad again. Et's bin reported that he war dead, ye know, but I reckon he's flopped back into existence."

"I've heard much of the strange being, but never have seen him," said Buckhorn Bill, thoughtfully. "But he has heretofore used a rifle that barked."

"Yas, I reckon you're O. K. thar; but mabbe he's cut ther tongue out o' ther anymal."

Between them the two scouts kept a close surveillance upon the prairie, and more than once they caught a glimpse of the glistening rifle-barrel in the dying sunlight, and each time the death-yell of a pirate was sure to follow.

The roughs now kept their persons so closely concealed that no opportunity was afforded Buckhorn Bill to practice his guess-work shots with any degree of success, and he therefore desisted.

The sun was by this time kissing the western horizon before plunging its head into a bank of thunder-clouds which were rolling up to greet it; down in the deep valley at the right of the two scouts, the shadows of night were already growing in density. A breeze was springing up, which was a relief after the scorching smiles of the sun upon a land which needed rain more than aught else.

"I guess I've done about all in my catalogue thet ken be done fer to-day," said Buckhorn Bill, taking a last survey of the prairie. "The game keeps low, an' we're goin' ter hev a squawld'rectly, so I'm goin' ter slide out o' this, if possible. Ef I need ye ye'll heer the old buckhorn screech, an' ken amble toward me as fast as ye please—fer ye know I'll stand a good deal devilment before I squeal."

"Yas, that's so. Be keerful thet the durned galoots don't flop ye, fu'st ye kno', an' take good care of yourself till we meet again."

"You bet I'll care for No. 1," replied Bill, with a smile, then shaking hands with the fat scout, and slinging his rifle upon his back, he cautiously parted the grass and crept away.

Not toward the valley, as some would have done, but straight along its bank, as it ran in a western course. He knew full well that it would be worth his life to descend into the valley, where no doubt a score of the white savages were lurking.

He had never but the once, when little Maolin had been shot, been in the power of the Press-Gang, and he had no wish to fall into their hands now, for he was aware that they would put him to death in the most horrible manner conceivable.

For he had been the deadliest and most persistent of all their foes—a veritable scourge whom they feared even more, individually, than they did the strong arm of the law.

As they had been unmerciful to his mother and little Maolin, he had been unmerciful to them—had become a terror, an outlaw-hunter of acknowledged superiority; none were there as bold, fearless, cunning and revengeful as he who answered to the name of Buckhorn Bill.

Softly the young Scourge crept along, his every

sense on the alert for danger, his eagle-eyes scanning the path and its sidings—his whole mind imbued in the work of escaping.

Now and then he heard voices close by; then he would pause until certain of his ground before going further.

As he crept on, the clouds rolled up blacker and blacker from the west, and spread out like giant wings over the face of the sky. It also grew rapidly darker on the prairie, until things at a distance were not distinguishable.

Several times in his progress the young Scourge came near falling into a trap set by the maneuvering outlaws.

But, each time some strange intuition warned him of the danger in time for him to escape it. And at last he concluded that he was out of the cordon that had been woven around him.

"Now, then, let the imps guard the prairie—they'll find one parcel of their game missing," he muttered. "Hope they won't get hold of Old Elephant, though. Wouldn't like ter have him angelized yet awhile."

Rising to his feet, he hurried along briskly in a western direction. In the course of half an hour he descended a prairie slope, and passing through a belt of scrubby timber, mixed here and there with old dead pines which the lightning had blasted, he came out upon the low sandy shore of a little sheet of water, known as Loon Lake, from the fact that a species of birds of this name had been found swimming upon its waters.

Buckhorn Bill started back with an exclamation of surprise as he saw the water lying before him. Wide as was his acquaintance with this country, he had never yet stumbled upon this lake, although he had heard of it frequently.

Another thing surprised him, too.

A slight girlish figure was standing at the water's edge, not a dozen yards from where the young Scourge had halted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NYMPH OF THE LAKE—FRIENDS MEET—A CLEVER DECOY.

BUCKHORN BILL was not a little surprised at seeing the girl. Least expected of all, was the finding of her here, where human habitations were not—where prowling red skins came in the summer months, to hunt and fish.

"I wonder who she is?" he muttered, standing back among the shadows, and watching her. "Graceful and pretty of build, and I reckon she's pretty of face, ef a feller could get a glimpse of it. About sixteen or seventeen. Poor Maolin would have been sixteen to-day, had she lived."

A deep regretful sigh escaped the lips of the Young Scourge, and his face was shadowed by an expression as dark as the night around him. He had never forgotten the great wrong; the murder of his little sister was ever engraven forcibly upon his memory;—he could *not* lose sight of it.

For several moments he stood under the trees, at a loss what to do. The girl was standing in the sand, with the waves of the lake lapping the shore at her feet, apparently in a deep reverie, as she gazed out over the water which was shrouded in darkness, too deep for penetration by the human eye.

As Bill had observed, she was graceful of form, being roundly contoured and developed, and of medium stature. Her face, which the Boy Scourge was unable to scrutinize, it being averted, was finely chiselled and pretty, lusciously tinted with the roses of perfect health. Her mouth was small and sweetly expressive; her eyes brown, and her hair, worn waving down to her waist, was of the same hue. She was attired in a light calico dress which reached to the ankles, exposing a pair of prettily slippered feet. Around her waist was a belt containing a knife, and upon her head a ribboned straw hat. Not far away a light skiff rocked against the beach, and showed the mode of her transportation hither.

"I wonder what she's doing over here, anyhow?" Buckhorn Bill muttered, his curiosity growing stronger every moment. "It kinder 'appears to me thet et ain't natteral fer a gal ter be alone out hyar, so fur in the wilderness, unless there's something back of it. Don't think I've seen her anywhere, either, unless I've forgotten about it. Must have come across the lake, judgin' by that boat. Wonder ef she lives over there, or what? That's the question before the debate court."

"Kinder like ter know what she's up to, an' who she is; but, jest as like's not she'd feel insulted ef I war ter introduce myself to her. So I don't know what to do. She don't seem ter hev any idee et's goin' ter rain, neither. 'Spect she's waitin' fer some one!"

By this time night had set in with its full darkness, and the lone watcher on the beach was hardly distinguishable from where Bill was standing. The thunder was growling along the threatening sky, the wind was puffing fitfully through the trees, and zig-zag streaks of lightning played over the black storm-clouds, overhead. The rain would soon come in torrents, and Bill made up his mind to act, in preference to standing in idleness. He would go forward and speak to this strange nymph of the lake-shore, and learn, if possible, her business out here alone.

He was about to steal forward on his errand, when he detected the sound of a footstep in his rear, and wheeled about, quickly.

"Don't be alarmed," said a pleasant voice. "Guess I ain't no painter ner grizzly, as is goin' to mount. You're a party feller, ain't ye, standin' heer a gazin' et thet gal, yonder, like as ef you're love-sick!"

"Well, whose business is it?" Buckhorn demanded, peering around, trying to outline the speaker. "Who are you, and what are you doin' a prowlin' around here like a red varmint? Got a notion ter put a lead telegram after you, on the strength of my suspicion thet you're a pirate?"

"Humph! on your ear, eh?" replied the other, good-naturedly. "A wasp stung ye, thar, or sum heathen bin fingerin' fer yer scalp. Needn't plug yer pills at me—I ain't no pirate. My name's Turtle Tom Frailey, trapper and b'ar-ketcher, at yer service. You're Buckhorn Bill, I know, fer I got a micricopic view uv yer handsum bazzoo, awhile ago!"

"Turtle Tom!" exclaimed the young Scourge, in great surprise. "Can it be possible? I and every else have supposed you to be dead, you have been missing so long. Come up, and give us yer aw."

Accordingly, the speaker advanced, and the two young men exchanged hearty hand-shakes—for Turtle Tom was young, being about the age of our ner—namely, eighteen.

His parents having been slaughtered during the Indian campaign, when he was but twelve years of age, he had adopted the calling of a hunter and trapper, which he had followed ever since.

He and Buckhorn Bill had been close friends and companions from early childhood, and until a year before, when the young trapper had suddenly disappeared and had never been heard from since. He was a plain young fellow in buckskin—not one to attract much attention from the feminine sex, but a fellow whose manly attributes were admired by men generally. He had a smooth, plain face, not handsome, black eyes and hair, and a strengthful form.

"By Jingo! I never was more tickled to meet a fellow in my life!" cried Buckhorn Bill, enthusiastically. "Where the deuce have you been this year or over, when we've all been mournin' you for dead?"

"Well, Bill, that's a hard question ter answer without a full stock of breath aboard, and as I'm minus a full supply, at present, you'll hev ter let me postpone my story 'til another time. What are you up to, skulkin' around in the wood like an Injun, with an eye cast hawk-like upon that leetle gal, yonder?"

"Why, you see I—I was just wonderin' what

fetches her here!" answered Bill, in some confusion. "Do you know her?"

"No, but thet ain't a-sayin' I wouldn't like to. Bin puzzlin' my topography fer half an hour ter find out what she's up to, but I can't."

"Nor I. Reckon she's waitin' fer somebody, er else she's crazy, or somethin' of the kind. I was jest a-goin' ter speak to her, a bit ago, when you came up."

"I know ye was an' thet's the reason I spoke, fer I didn't want ye to poke yer handsome phiz in whar I'd made calculations."

"Oh! that's it, eh? Well, shall we pull straws to see who goes for her?"

"No, I guess it ain't worth while. You sail in, an' ef ye kin scoop thet pretty craft wi' yer good canvas I won't object."

"I don't want to invest in females further than necessary, so if you've got any little love ideas in yer head, I'll put in a good word for you!" Bill said, with a laugh. "You stay here, and I'll go forward and see what the gal is up to."

Leaving his rifle behind him, the young Scourge stole out of the woods on tip-toe, and softly over the sands of the lake-shore. So stealthy was his tread that he was beside the lake-nymph, ere she discovered his approach or presence.

When she did, she neither screamed nor started to run away, but stood still in her tracks, and gazed at him, coolly.

This took him so much aback, that it was several moments ere he could command his power of speech.

He expected nothing else than that she would be frightened, but here she stood with as much composure as might have been exhibited by an old hunter, inured to peril and surprises.

"Well?" she said, interrogatively, looking up into his face, studiously. "What do you want?"

"I want to know who you are, and what you are doing here alone on this lake-shore, such a night as this?" Bill replied, sheepishly, after some hesitation. He was becoming aware that he was infringing upon that which was none of his business.

"Humph!" and the lips of the girl curled just a trifle. "Suppose I should tell you that it was none of your business! What then?"

"Why, I should say you were exceedingly sassy, as my motives are the best. I did not know but what you were in trouble—lost, perhaps, and unable to determine the direction of your home."

The Buckhorn's tones were now soft and reassuring, and his language better than he generally used, for, thanks to his mother and father, he had received a fair education, and it was a mere habit derived from association with rough, western characters, which caused him usually to speak in the illiterate style of the frontier.

The girl Nymph laughed merrily at his last remark.

"No need to fear of my getting lost," she replied, "for I could find my way to the place I call home with my eyes blindfolded. I have seen you, heretofore, although you knew it not. You are Buckhorn Bill!"

"Yes, I reckon you are level, thar. How'd you find it out?"

"Oh! I've seen you at Squatterville, occasionally, sometimes at the stores—other times in company with one you call Pearl."

"Eh? is that so? Yes, it was Pearl Burdelle, or Prescott, as she is generally known. Do you know her?"

"By sight."

"She is a very sweet, pretty girl!" Bill said this, a conscious flush stealing over his cheek.

"And some one thinks a great deal of her!" the Nymph twitted, with a little laugh. "I don't blame you, Mr. Burnham; she really is a nice, lovable girl."

Buckhorn Bill whirled around in the sand on his heel; then scratched his head perplexedly.

How was this thing progressing? This strange girl seemed to know considerable about him and his affairs; and he could but wonder at her child-like familiarity in talking to him, a stranger.

"Guess I ain't very deep in luv, yet," he said with a grimace. "With ther exception o' my poor dead mother an' sister, I never hev hed a very exalted opinion uv ther female line—begging your pardon, of course."

"You are excusable of course," was the reply, and then she began to edge toward the boat.

"You ain't going?" Bill demanded.

"Yes, I must."

"But what did you come here for?"

"I cannot tell you. I'd advise you as—as a friend—to leave this vicinity at once."

"You don't say! Why?"

"Because there is danger!"

"Bah! Danger and I are old pards. We've learned each other's grip by heart."

"You are incorrigible. You should take my advice."

"Well, we'll see about that, by and by. Going to tell me your name, ain't ye, before ye vamoose?"

"What for?"

"Oh! because I want to remember you by some name. I kerry a register up hayr in my topographical construction, whar I put down ther name an' sum total uv every one I meet."

"Well, then, my name is Mehetible Ann Macca-day, with a little ripple of roguish laughter."

"Git cut! I know better. Pretty birds must necessarily have appropriate names."

"Well, then, Moly Miner."

"Which is a decided improvement on the other. You won't tell me what brought you here?"

"No!"

"When will you come again?"

"I don't know—maybe never."

"Yes, you will, or I shall come and hunt you up."

"Don't dare to attempt it, I beg of you! You are in the midst of great peril, which will only be increased should you come in search of me. Good-by."

"Good-by!" Buckhorn replied, with rather a strange sensation tugging in the neighborhood of his young heart, as he saw the nymph step into the red-painted skiff, and fit the oars into the row-locks.

In a moment more she had pulled out onto the lake, and was lost from view.

When she was gone, Bill crept back into the timber, where Turtle Tom was awaiting him.

The rain was beginning to spatter down faster, while the thunder growled and pounded within the gates of heaven. Now, too, the lightning occasionally glared, vividly, lighting up the scene around for considerable distance.

"Et's goin' ter be a regular old antediluvian storm!" observed Turtle Tom, crawling in under the shelter of a huge cottonwood, whose foliage grew close down to the ground. "I don't opine we kin get a much better place than this, eh, Bucky?"

"No! we'll stay heer till the storm is over, and see what turns up. See!" as a flash of lightning lit the heaven and earth—"there goes the girl, now. How big is this lake, Tom?"

"Three miles wide by six long, I believe. Thar's never bin much notice taken of it, because et possesses no peculiarities like some lakes. The Injuns sumtimes come here and camp on a big island about a mile out from here. Its outlet is the Skunk creek."

"Is it deep?"

"Yes—is said to have no bottom, in some places. This forest surrounds it on all sides."

Conversation was now laborious, for a great racket was occasioned by both the falling rain and booming thunder; while the heavens were incessantly fired by the blinding glares of lightning. The rain poured down in great torrents, and the wind blew the waves of the little lake high up on the beach.

"Look!" suddenly cried Turtle Tom, pointing out

on the water, where a flash of lightning revealed two men in an open boat, clasped in a bear-like hug. It was a momentary glimpse that was afforded the two youths; then the wind brought in to land a wild, distressed cry of—

"Help! help! Buckhorn Bill!"

Then a silence followed; the storm lulled, the thunder ceased to growl.

"I must go!" the Young Scourge cried, leaving his rifle behind. "That was Old Elephant, I reckon, squealin' fer help."

He bounded down to the lake and waded out into the water up to his arm-pits. Then he paused to get bearings, when another flash of lightning came. When it did come, he made a horrifying discovery. *He had been decoyed*—entrapped by Captain Coffin's men!

A dozen boat-loads of the Prairie Pirates were rowing stealthily toward him—while others were shutting off his retreat toward land!

CHAPTER VII.

MAJOR STERLING AND HIS MISSION.

THE astonishment of Captain Ned Stockton knew no limit, when he looked but could see nothing of the owner of that strange black hand, which had so boldly snatched away the message of the secret cipher.

Like a phantom of the blackness itself, the being, or whatever it was, had come and gone, leaving neither trail nor track.

"Quick! up and spread in every direction. Fifty dollars to the man who catches the thief!" cried Captain Ned. "I wouldn't have lost the message for that sum."

A hasty search was made over the prairie surrounding the camp, but nothing of the black-handed thief was heard or seen. As mysteriously as he had come had he gone, and all efforts to find him were unavailing, so that the Red Rifle Team returned to camp empty-handed.

"It's too ridiculously bad!" growled Captain Ned, greatly vexed. "I wouldn't have lost that paper for anything."

"Pshaw!" replied Hal Everette, "it wasn't worth anything. You couldn't make anything out of it; so what good was it ever likely to do you?"

"None at present perhaps; but hereafter we might have become possessed of a key to the cipher. Then we could have used the information to some purpose."

"Well, we may be able to get a duplicate," suggested Dick Reade. "All we have to do is to tell old Fowler that a sneak-thief stole away the paper before we could make it out, and he'll go back to the president of the whisky ring, and procure another."

"A capital idea!" accepted Ned, brightening up. "Go and rouse the old chap at once, and we'll apprise him of our loss. By making him still think that we are the Press-Gang we may be able to get much out of him."

"Sh!" warned Hal in a low tone—"here comes the old gent now. He's bin disturbed by the racket we made, and is coming out to see about it."

Judge Fowler, true enough, had left his tent, and was coming toward the fire at his waddling gait. As was surmised, his dreams had been disturbed, and in sleepy anxiety he demanded to know the cause of the noise.

Captain Ned volunteered to explain, relating about the theft, and suggesting that he (Fowler) should go back to Fort Alexander for a duplicate of the message. This he promised, rather grumblingly, to do; then trudged back to his tent, muttering something about being disturbed again.

"We've things working nicely, now," said Captain Ned, after they too had accepted of the shelter of the remaining tent, because the rain was falling, "if this black-fisted wretch will only keep his finger out of our pie. It will only take old Fowler four or

five days at the longest, to ride to Alexander and back, and we may as well stay here till he returns."

"I tell you what my ijeer is," said Dick Reade. "I calculate this black-handed galoot is one of the Press-Gang, an' seein' Fowler's mistake, without bein' able to apprise him, he's snatched away the document so that we shouldn't find out the secret it contained."

"I hope it ain't that. But, there's no tellin'. Hel-lo!"

This latter exclamation was occasioned by something that fell at the feet of Captain Ned—a sharp, long arrow, which had been shot through the tent siding by some one from the outside.

The tail of the arrow, half-way up to the head, was covered with wrapped string, beneath which could be seen a bit of white paper.

"It's a message from some unseen friend!" cried Dick Reade, who had picked it up. "Let's see what mystery is to be unraveled by this strange communication."

With the point of his dirk he ripped off the cord, and unwound the paper from the arrow stem.

"Hal there are two papers," he cried—"one is the paper of that secret cipher, returned, and the other is a message in pencil. Let me see what the contents are."

"Inclosed you will find the message which was stolen from you by the black hand. I wished to know what was up among the whisky gang, and by aid of a powerful lens discovered. If you wish to know, press a hot flat-iron over the back surface, and writing will come to view. It is written with milk, and the scrawls on the other side are simply to puzzle any one, outside of the Whisky Ring, into whose hands their message may fall. Your proposed attempt to break up the Whisky Ring is praiseworthy, and I wish you success."

"DEATH SHADOW."

"Death Shadow!" echoed Captain Ned, in surprise. "Who's he?"

"We have that yet to learn; probably he's some outlandish old frontiersman, with a wrong to avenge, who has adopted that dramatic *nom de plume*. Now, how are we to get the writing out of this cipher message? We've no flat-iron."

"We'll have to wash off a stone, and heat it, for a substitute," said Hal Everette. "And you don't want to tell anything of our getting possession of this message again to old Fowler; let the old tub-of-fat go back to Fort Alexander, and maybe he'll return with news that will be more beneficial to us."

"Yes, you're right," said Stockton. "Keep the matter a secret from the old traitor and we'll use him while we can, and then hang him up as an example for others of his ilk to profit by. The next thing is a stone."

The work of improvising a hot flat-iron out of a cold muddy stone was not one of ease, but after repeated experiments, they succeeded in getting one hot. After this was rubbed off, the cipher-message was drawn over it several times, which had the effect of bringing to light the secret lines which had been traced in milk. When all had been brought out, Dick Reade read the following, aloud:

"FORT ALEXANDER, August 8, 187—.

"CAPTAIN COFFIN:—DEAR SIR:—I write to know if you have any more *moonshine* ready to flood, for there are several places which need supplying. I have shipped to Deckel's Siding, N. P. R. R., four hundred bushels of rye, which your caravan can get, as soon as you arrive there with your consignment of moonshine, as usual."

"Be stealthy, for I hear rumors that certain Government officials have been ordered here. I send this by a new and influential member. See that his needs are attended to. Work the Press-Gang constantly, for we shall need a full hand should hostilities begin. Ship as soon as possible, and await a reply from
THE PRESIDENT."

"There you have it all in a nutshell, my larkies!" cried Captain Ned, jubilantly. "I told you there was knowledge in that paper."

"But it is comparatively valueless to you," observed Everette, "as you do not know the location of the distillers' stronghold."

"I'll know where that is soon, too," vowed Stockton, "for I shall leave you to care for things here on the prairies, while I scout around after this Captain Coffin. Once I shadow him, I'll freeze to his scent until the distillery is unearthed."

"A good idea; but come! it's time to turn in, for we know not, in this strange country what the morrow may bring forth."

It was Dick Reade who said this, and as his advice was accepted next to that of Captain Ned, a general stretching out was the result. The night passed without event at the camp, and in the morning the sun rose as hot as ever it shone down upon a western plain.

The rangers were early astir, and after feeding Judge Fowler all his great capacity could contain, he was started off for old Fort Alexander, from whence he promised to return inside of five days with the dispatches.

Whether he would or not, of course could only be conjectured.

Three years before, Captain Ned Stockton had been a rising young lawyer in a thriving border city.

He had also connection with the United States Secret Service of Washington, as a member, for the purpose of watching the border towns which were manufacturing and dealing extensively in untaxed whisky.

As it turned out, the Government could have appointed no better man to fill the position than Stockton, for not only was he alive to his duty, but ever and anon he made raids upon illicit ranches, and successfully captured both the whisky and the manufacturers thereof.

These raids were satisfactory to the Government, in the greatest degree, and so faithfully did the young detective pursue his work, that great confidence was put in him—perhaps more than was extended to any other member along the frontier.

Needing help in his raids, upon which he could depend at a moment's notice, he had received orders to pick out the least number of safe, trusty men he could get along with; whereupon the Red Rifle Team was organized, and the service they had done along with their gallant commander, had led them to be put under regular salary as "minions of the Government."

It was a telegram from head-quarters that had sent the rifle team up into Northern Dakota, to learn the truth in regard to a gigantic whisky distillery, a rumor of which had been wafted to Washington. Ready to work at notice, the gallant band had come, and the reader has already seen what they had learned concerning the great fraud.

A year previous to our introduction to them, Ned Stockton was sitting in his office, at B— City, engaged in looking over some charts and maps which lay before him on his desk.

The day was a warm one in July, and his door stood ajar to admit the refreshing breeze that swept in from the prairie.

So attentively was he engaged in his work, that he did not for some time notice a stranger who had entered and taken a seat.

When he did, he bowed politely, and demanded to know if he could do anything in his line for the stranger, whom he recognized as an officer he had once seen at Fort Alexander, while on a visit there.

The man was just fifty, probably, judging from his silvered locks, although he was yet fresh and handsome of countenance. His eyes were black and brilliant, and he wore a long beard of a like hue.

"My name is David Sterling," he said, in answer

to young Stockton's inquiry, "and I am an ex-major, retired from active service in the army. I am, and have been in trouble, for many years, and hearing of you and your proficiency as a detective, I have come to see if you can do anything for me."

"Exactly!" Stockton replied, laying aside his charts, and taking his note-book and pencil. "Something in the moonshine line, eh?"

"Oh! no; not that. My trouble is of a different nature. You, in your trips through the country might be able to find what I want. If you will listen I will tell you my trouble."

Accordingly, Captain Ned did listen, and in shorthand, which he thoroughly understood, he chronicled the story which the major related to him. It was one of much importance, and one in which he became instantly interested—a story of a foul wrong which had been done the officer, years before, ere time had silvered his locks.

When he had finished, he wiped away tears which had gathered in his eyes during the relation of the story, and said:

"Now, young man, do you not think you may be able to assist me? Your knowledge of the West and western men, among whom you mingle, is becoming greater every day, and you travel over a large scope of territory. Maybe you might run across the two objects of my life, unexpectedly; will you then assist me?"

"Most assuredly," Stockton replied. "If I strike a trail likely to prove successful so far as you are concerned, I will follow it up."

"God bless you for the words," the major had said, and after pressing upon Stockton a purse of money, he took his departure.

That was the last the young detective saw of him, until to-day, when shortly after the departure of old Judge Fowler for Fort Alexander, this selfsame Major Sterling rode into the camp.

Stockton recognized him at a glance and shook hands with him, cordially, when he had dismounted.

"I am glad to see you, major," he said, warmly, "and welcome you to the quarters of the Red Rifle Team; but I am much surprised to see you in person, looking even younger than when at first I met you."

The major smiled.

"Perhaps my youth is coming on in my old age," he said. "I once knew a man whose hair was said to be white at the age of twenty-three. On his ninety-first birthday his hair was black and abundant. What have you made out concerning my case, young man?"

"I am sorry to say, nothing," Captain Ned replied, as he conducted the venerable officer into camp. "It has not yet been my fortune to come across anything appertaining to your case, for all I have kept my eyes open."

"Yet I feel the time is not far distant!" the major said, bowing his head upon his breast, with an inward groaning of spirit. "I have strange dreams of late which have led me to believe that my hour of happiness is not far off. I have never wholly given up—I will not, for, while there is life there is hope. Therefore I have come out here, and seeing your camp down here, awhile ago, I put into port, to rest."

"I am glad, for we are about to attempt another whisky case, and something may turn up which will be interesting to you. One cannot tell what a day may bring forth, you know."

"Truly spoken, young man, and with your consent, I will keep along with you and your band, for I have still a strong arm yet, and might be of some little service to you. Indeed, my spirit is yet that of a boy of twenty, and were another war to break out, I doubt not but I should take a hand, old as I am. And, if you should find it in your power to restore to me what I have lost, you shall not lack reward, for I've got more money, probably, than you ever saw."

And so the major was made welcome to the ran-

gers' camp, and entertained as a guest, while every respect was shown him because of his old age. What was his mission none but Stockton knew.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HOT-BED OF ENEMIES—A MYSTERY OF THE LAKE—THE CAPTURED MESSAGE.

THE situation of the Boy Scourge was not only one of unpleasantness, but of deadly peril. For, in that flash of lightning he saw not only that he was cut off from retreat to the shore, but beheld also the wild exultant expression on the horde of fierce faces, and heard the yells of the enemy echo and resound through the lake forests.

He only too well knew that only quick action could save him from death, and that it must be a fight till the last breath was gone.

"The devils worked their trick very smart!" he muttered, as he stood for a moment undecided how to act. "I don't reckon the gal had anything to do with it, though, fer she war too good ter plan fer my death! Wish Tom had come with me. I reckon we two could just about made it interestin' fer these reptiles. Hope et won't lightning any more, neith er, for they ked perforate me like a piece o' cardboard."

The boats containing the Press-Gang ruffians were creeping steadily nearer and nearer, the muffled paddles making no noise that would betray their exact whereabouts.

Nor could Bill see them, so dense was the blackness of the night. The rain was again pouring down in torrents, and the thunder crashing with renewed force.

Had he not been cut off from land, the Boy Scourge would not have been puzzled how to act; but, as it was, he was undecided. He had two chances of getting out—one by diving in under water, and swimming out into the lake, and the other of fighting his way to shore, where, in all probabilities, he would find a line of desperate enemies ready to seize him.

On the other hand, if he got beyond the enemies out into the lake, he would have to make a long and tiresome swim to reach land in any direction. Turtle Tom had said that there was an island in the lake a mile from shore, but to try to find it in this Stygian darkness would be equally as preposterous as for a mariner to attempt to navigate the seas without a compass.

"I'll fight, first, and see what can be done in the way of escaping, afterward!" he muttered, drawing his pair of seven-shooters, and cocking them, carefully. "The first nigger on deck gits a blizzard."

It was evident that the outlaws wished to capture the young Scourge first, and put him to death afterward, else they would have fired upon him.

Fortunately Bill's wish was gratified, for no more lighting came, immediately, to reveal his position to the enemy. But he knew, all the same, that they were not far away although he could neither see nor hear them. With caution he retreated far enough toward the shore so that the water did not interfere with his arms; then pointing both of his revolvers into the dense blackness, he fired at random. He waited long enough to hear two answering yells of agony; then dropped in under water, just in time to escape a volley of bullets which came from the enemy.

As he went down he thrust his revolvers securely into his pocket, so that he should not lose them, and then swam in under water for a considerable distance. At last, however, he was forced to come to the surface, and found that he had come up out of standing depth.

He also made a startling discovery!

Two boats filled with outlaws, were passing slowly by on either side of him—so closely that an ear-tick grazed against one side of his head!

In alarm he held his breath, and again sunk silently beneath the waves. But he could not remain down for any length of time.

The boats were past now, and he was alone in the waters of a lake of which he knew nothing.

"Thank God I'm out of that scrape," he muttered, whopping over on his back and allowing the water to float him along until he was rested. "Whew! I wish old Jupiter Pluvius wouldn't shed such mighty big tears down into my face, though. Wonder if I unmaterialized the spirits of them two chaps w'at yellel. I hope so, and am sorry I could not manage to pay 'em all my respects in better shape. Hope Tom Frailey ain't got into them cusses' hands, but it's more'n likely he has. Durn 'em, I can't help lettin' 'em know I'm alive and kickin', yet ef it is dangerous!"

And, detaching from his belt the buckhorn we have before mentioned, he placed the small end to his lips, and blew a pure, mellow blast, which echoed and re-echoed over lake and prairie for many minutes afterward, with wonderful tenacity of sound.

"There! that's what tells where Buckhorn Bill is, an' that he's all right side up with care. Jemima! hear the cusses sw'ar an' yowl over the discovery that I'm a human eel w'at's wiggled through their fingers. Guess it will be advisable fer me ter exert my mermaid proclivities now, in order to escape."

Restoring the horn, which was one of his own invention, to his belt, he rolled over again, and swam rapidly on out into the lake.

It now began to lighten, incessantly, and in such vivid glares that the lake was lit up every other moment, as light as day.

"Great mother o' Moses! I never see sech lightnin' before," Bill muttered, as he swam on through the buffeting waves. "Yes, an' by Christmas, them imps are puttin' after me! Good enough—serves me right! I orter kept my trap shet, and I'd been all right. But, that's a virtual impossibility, sum-times. I've got to talk off w'at I'm inflated with, or bust."

The Press-Gang had indeed turned their boats about, and the oarsmen were pulling with a will, while a number of them were occupying standing positions, with rifles in their hands, apparently preparatory for use.

"I reckon the galoots mean shute now," the Young Scourge muttered, as he occasionally glanced back. "They've their optics froze onter me, too, or else they wouldn't come so straight. Dang the lightning—Criminy!"

He started visibly, and grew pale as there came a frightful crash of thunder, that seemed to jar even the waters of the lake. Then the flashes of lightning once more ceased to come.

"Jovel there's sumthin' wonderful about this, hanged ef there ain't!" Bill muttered, gazing toward the inky heavens in awed surprise. "Ther old gent up there seems to know and do what I want. Mebbe he's got kind of a liking after me, after all; and I know I think of His greatness too little. But et sha'n't be so after this. I'm all hunky now, ef I hold out in strength."

Turning out of the course he had been pursuing, he swam toward the right or northern end of the lake—swam as rapidly as he could, for he knew his safety depended upon getting out of the track of the boats in time. Ten minutes of hard stroking; then he paused and listened. He heard loud, angry voices west of him, and concluded that the outlaws were still pulling on in the vain hope of finding him—for it was a vain hope.

"Guess the salamanders aire gettin' considerably riley," the Buckhorn observed, with a smile of triumph.

"Hello! they've lit a lantern off yonder. Wish I had my rifle, an' sumthin' besides water to stand on, and I'd make some punctuations in their life parchment. Wonder where I am, anyhow, or how fur it is to that island Tom Frailey spoke about? Twixt that an' mainland, the distance must be about equal. I wish sum well-disposed botch of humanity would

come along with a boat, for I'm gettin' all-fired tired."

Knowing his endurance would not last much longer without rest, he turned over on his back, and floated about at the will of the waves for some time, keeping watch on the movements of the outlaws, whom he knew to be where he saw the light.

But at last he was startled by bearing the dip of a paddle, and turning quickly over on his face he propelled and kept himself upon the surface with one hand, while, with the other, he drew a revolver.

A boat was coming directly toward him. Did it contain friends or enemies?

Then he heard a little laugh, and—

"Well, sirl are you here?"

It was the girl's voice that spoke:

"Great Jupiter! who are you?" Bill demanded, wonderingly.

"Molly Miner, at your service!" and the boat floated nearer. "Climb in, and I will row you to shore. I wonder you escaped the Press-Gang."

"Oh! that's easy enough, when you once know how," Buckhorn Bill replied, with a laugh, as he clambered into the skiff. "But I didn't expect to be granted the pleasure of meeting you so soon, again. What do you know about them fancy roosters over there?"

"I may know a great deal, or a very little, but I cannot tell you anything."

"Bet a copper you belong to 'em, and know whar their roost is!"

"I won't bet. Here; lend me a hand, and we'll pull for the shore. The sooner you are on land the better it will be."

"Yas—for them chaps, yonder. But hold on. Just let me toot my horn ter let 'em know I'm all right. No doubt they're very anxious concerning my welfare!"

"No! you mustn't," said Molly, quickly, putting up her hand.

"Why not? Not one toot?"

"Because it would show your enemies just where to look for you; moreover, it would be certain death to me if it were known that I had anything to do with getting you ashore. Come! will you help me now, or will you let me do it all alone?"

"Not much, you sha'n't! Excuse me, fer I war thinkin' o' tootin' my horn, an' not ef escapin'."

Instead of one, he seized both of the oars, and pulled swiftly through the waters. Not a word more was spoken until the boat grounded upon the sandy shore; then Bill sprung out, and said, while he extended his hand, frankly:

"I thank you very much, Miss Miner, and some day I hope to reward you for your services to me, to-night."

He then, after clasping her hand a moment in his, was about to stride away, but she called him back.

"Stop!" she cried, with her childish imperiousness. "I want you yet, before you go. You must promise me something, and faithfully keep the promise."

"The deuce you say! what is it!—d'ye want me ter marry ye, or ye goin' ter get me into some trap?"

"Neither. I want you to promise to forever leave this lake-shore, and never come near it again."

"What. Clear out, and never cum back again? Not much, I won't—not even for you. An' I reckon thar ain't many things I wouldn't do fer you."

"Very well. I'll not ask you again. Stay, and take the consequences that must follow."

Witho it another word she pulled back onto the lake, and was gone.

"Reckon she's somehow connected with them ar' Press-Gang pukes!" Buckhorn Bill muttered, staring after her, "an' she ain't purtickler desirous thet I shed agitate their peace o' mind. But the danged skunks hev already hed several pieces uv my mind, w'at stuck by 'em. Let me see; I'm on the main shore now, and there don't appear ter be any one about. Reckon I'd better squat sumwhere around here, and wait fer darkness to clear away afore I ramble about too permiscussly. Don't seem to be

any one in this yere vicinity at present, onless they're scroochin' around among these manzinta bushes. Reckon I'd better reconnoiter."

Making as little noise as possible, he skirmished around through the adjacent woods, but without the result of finding any of the enemy.

"Guess the pesky pukes hev all took ter water. Now, then, I'm goin' ter take a nap, hit or miss, or I won't be fit fer a fig, ter-morrow. This makes three days an' nights thet I hev'n't hed any sleep."

Searching about, he soon succeeded in finding a desirable couch. But he was not destined to occupy it in slumber, for, just as he had got himself nicely prostrated, his attention was called to a large, brilliant light upon the waters. It seemed to pour out of some object out in the center of the lake, and shot over the waters in a wide yellow bolt toward the eastern shore.

"Hello! what's that?" the Young Scourge muttered, raising himself upon his elbow, and gazing toward the light in astonishment. "What confounded mystery is there about this lake, anyhow? Thet looks es ef it was from a locomotive head-light, but I don't reckon they've got any locomotives hayr. Too dark fer a feller ter make out whar et comes from, too. Guess I won't try, very serious, as long as et don't bite me."

Without leaving his couch of leaves, which was under a thorn tree's shelter, nearly at the water's edge, he watched the mysterious streaming light. It did not seem to be moving, but rather remained fixed and stationary.

"But my gizzard I'll try ter anylize thet bizness, another night when I ain't so tired," Bill muttered, "fer thar's kind of a prickly sensation in my pericracium w'at tells me this whisky distillery ain't 'ar off. Hello! who comes there?"

A skiff had touched shore but a few yards off, and a human form leaped ashore and skulked toward the woods. It needed but a glance to assure Buckhorn that it was a savage, and without a moment of hesitation, for he hated an Indian worse than he did a snake, he drew from his bosom the india-rubber pouch in which his revolver had reposed in safety—took it out and, with a quick aim, fired, the flash lighting the night, and the report ringing far over the lake.

With a piercing death-shriek the red-skin dropped upon the sands, and bled out his life. Creeping out from his concealment, Buckhorn Bill approached the spot where the stricken savage lay in death's throes.

"Eh? I tickled him to death wi' plumbago, did I?" the Young Scourge muttered, with a chuckle. "Pity I couldn't hev killed a dozen wi' thet same pill. Hello! it's that old scurvy, Long Death, sure's I'm a Christian. Didn't know he war in league wi' this Whisky Ring. An' he's got a paper, thar, clutched in the palm of his greasy hand. It's a message from the gang ter some one, and I'll jest about e'p it in."

Raising the red-skin's hand and parting the fingers, he soon had possession of the message. It proved, on examination by his punk light, to be written in the same cipher that had so puzzled Ned Stockton and the Red Rifle Team, and covered half a page of common note-paper.

"Humph!" Buckhorn muttered in disgust; "some of that secret cipher again. Oh, well, I can keep it for Sunday reading!"

The dip of paddles was now distinctly audible, and it needed no argument to convince the Scourge that the Press-Gang was yet after him, having been again aroused by the pistol-report.

The light upon the lake had died out!

"Guess I'll take to a tree, and see ef I can't catch a bit of a snooze while they're searching for me."

CHAPTER IX.

BUCKHORN BILL'S VENTURE—AGAIN ON THE WATER—AN INTERESTING REGATTA.

GLANCING sharply around him, Buckhorn Bill

pied an immense cottonwood tree, which grew at the edge of the lake, and he selected it as the one he should climb. It was large of circumference, with limbs growing down within six feet of the ground, and was fully fifty feet high, if not more.

The Young Scourge sprang up among the lower branches, from whence he worked his way cautiously upward from limb to limb, until he had gained a position about fifteen feet from the ground. Here he paused to rest and listen.

"Pretty good place fer to take a comfortable snooze," he muttered, looking carefully around to see that no one else than himself was in the tree. "Ef them danged salamanders will only let a feller alone—ha! they're going to make a landing at the foot of this very tree! Hope to goodness they'll go along about their bizness and not stick their snoots up inter this place."

The Press-Gang, or part of it, consisting of some twenty men, soon beached their boats, and gathered on the shore beneath the cottonwood. Eagerly Buckhorn listened to their conversation.

"Yas, here's Long Death, sure enough," growled one, kicking the stiffening body with his foot. "I know'd it war his death-screch the minnet I heerd it. Et air ther work of thet durned Buckhorn Bill, too. He nevyer wastes but one pill on a feller."

"He can't be fur away, then, Capt'in Gregg," declared another.

"Neither he ain't," was the gruff reply. "Wish Coffin war heer wi' his gang, an' we'd soon rout him out. Scatter, you skunks, and turn over every leaf from heer to Squatterville, but what you find him. Reckon et's time coffin war back from there, ef he hain't hed no delays."

"What in thunder'd I go fer, anyhow, an' take the best part o' ther gang?"

"Dunno no more about et than you do. Calculate he hed sum private bizness on hand. Cuss the luck! thet young thief w'at killed Long Death has tuk ther message I sent ter Whisky Bill. But thet won't hurt, tho', fer et'll take a smarter man than roams these prairies, outside o' our gang, ter make out ther secret o' ther Secret Cipher!"

No more of importance was said for the next few moments, for the outlaws scattered and began a close search for the daring Boy Scourge.

"It seems thet this ain't Cap' Coffin's gang, after all?" muttered Bill, as he swung his legs from the limb on which he was perched, in the tree. "But et's a parcel of the original band, under a chap they call Gregg. Wonder what Coffin is going to Squatterville for? Reckon he war bound there when he cornered me on the prairie, this afternoon. I'd like to be in his shoes, an' see an' hear what he's up to. Some devilishness, I'll warrant—perhaps to make some home fatherless or brotherless, with his Press-Gang bizness. Reckon ther day ain't fur off when I'll get my eye cocked onter him, and then thar'll be one less puke on ther face o' ther earth."

The ruffians were thrashing about through the woods below, at a terrible rate, and their profanity was such as Buckhorn had never heard equaled. Among the loudest and angriest of them all was Captain Gregg, and the oaths he used and the threats he made against the object of their search, were highly-flavored, and amusing to Buckhorn Bill, who was coolly enjoying the situation, as he sat upon his perch in among the branches of the giant cottonwood.

"Guess et won't be healthy fer me to fall into their claws now," he muttered. "Wonder how much longer they're goin' to keep up thet racket, an' keep a feller frum takin' a comfortable snooze. Hope they don't think I kin sleep in Bedlam."

The rain had by this time passed over, the thunder and lightning had subsided, and the ominous banks of clouds were clearing away to reveal a star-decked sky. It also became lighter, and Bill came to the conclusion that morning was not far away.

At last, growing discouraged, the whisky-roughs

all gathered on the lake-shore, beneath the cottonwood, Gregg being the last one to come.

"Tain't no use to prolong the search, I guess," he said, with a broad oath. "The young devil has hid, an' we might look a lifetime wi'out findin' him. Pile in, man ther oars, an' let's git, afore et comes light."

"Goin' ter leave a watch?"

"No! fer ef a man war to stay hayr, he'd only turn inter a macademized stiff ther minnit thet Buckhorn spied him. We've lost two men by him, ter-night, an' we won't risk any more, you bet. Pile in, all hands."

The three boats were filled, and pushed out into the lake, and the boat Long Death had come in, was also appropriated. Then the outlaws rowed silently away through the waters and the fading night.

"Now, ef et warn't fer fetchin' 'em back, I'd jest luv ter give a blast on my buckhorn," the Boy Scourge muttered, with a grin, in anticipation of the pleasure it would give him. "But, I guess I'll let 'em go, this time."

Concluding to remain where he was until daylight, he improved the intervening time by taking a nap, rude and primitive as were his accommodations. He awoke with the morning sunshine streaming into his face through the branches; birds were singing joyously all around him; and everything was fresh and fragrant from the previous night's storm.

Ever careful and wary, Buckhorn Bill crept through the different parts of the tree, and took observations to make sure that no enemies were lurking near, ere he descended to the ground. From the cottonwood he commanded a fine view of the lake, which lay calm and placid in the early morning sunlight.

He was at the northern end of it; the opposite termination he was unable to see with the naked eye.

But he could see each side, for a long way down, and also the island which Turtle Tom had spoken of. It consisted of four or five acres, or maybe six, of high land which rolled up and back from the water's edge, and was completely covered with a dense thicket of balsam trees, all of which had attained an unusual height.

Upon the surface of the lake and upon the island, there were no signs of human beings—all was quiet and peaceful as on a Sabbath morning, and nature seemed in one of her loveliest moods.

"I guess all's right," the Young Scourge said, when he had completed his observations. "Don't judge there's any of the devils around, or I should see some signs of life. I wish I had my trusty rifle, and I'd be all right."

He descended, and spent some moments lying on the ground and stretching out his limbs, which had been cramped during his stay in the tree.

He next stole cautiously along the lake-shore toward the point on the side of the lake where he had left Turtle Tom on the previous night. He did not expect to find him there now, but he hoped to regain his trusty rifle.

On reaching the point he found the weapon, sure enough, standing behind a tree, but careful search failed to discover Turtle Tom. Either he had been captured by the Press-Gang, or had left the vicinity of the lake.

After making a breakfast on fish from the lake, roasted over a smokeless fire, Buckhorn Bill spent the remainder of the day in resting, in a secluded nook which he discovered in the woods; for he had determined when night came again to know more concerning the mystery which enshrouded the lake.

"I b'lieve that there's a nest of the devils on that island," he said, thoughtfully, as he gazed around into the solitude of the woods, au' ef there is, I'm going ter find 'em out, ef I can. Purty soon the Government will smell a rat, and be offerin' a reward fer these pilgarlics, and who's a better right ter it than sum feller about my figure? To be sure, I needn't be hard up, fer Burnham Ranch and Burnham colony orter be fetchin' in a good round sum of

money every year; but let that slide—et'll stand offset ag'in' my old age. Reckon I orter keep alive on my wits an' what I kin kill in the shape of game."

His mind made up, he was not long in forming a plan of operations.

The best point of access to the island was near where he was lounging, the distance being only about a mile. At other points the distance varied, from one and a half miles to two or even three.

The day passed slowly, but he was much in need of rest, and when the shadows of night crept over the land and water, he was refreshed greatly, and prepared for work.

He waited until the darkness was as deep as it would be—for a moon would rise late in the evening—and then set to work on his projected plan of visiting the island.

He had no boat, and to swim a mile was not a part of his wish or intention. He was not long, however, in finding a mode of transportation. A few rods up the lake-shore he found a log which had been cut by some woodman's or surveyor's ax, and by using pries he soon had it afloat. Next, with his sheath-knife, he improvised a rude paddle; then, straddling the log, he set out upon his voyage.

The light log moved easily, and he was enabled to make satisfactory headway. But his position was undesirable, for the reason that he was exposed to the bullets of the enemy, should he be fired upon.

But it was yet some distance ere bullets would or could reach him from the island.

Overhead the stars were thick in the blue vault of heaven, which made a dim, uncertain light below, on the earth and water.

"I reckon I'll patent this boat," Bill chuckled. "Ef she don't git a rollin'-fit, I reckon I'm all hunkidori. *Illo!*"

He glanced to glance back toward the main land, when, what was his great surprise to see a boat putting off from shore, evidently in pursuit of him.

There was but one person visible at the oars, but this did not signify that there might not be more crouching in the bottom of the craft.

"Humph! I reckon we're goin' ter have kinder of a regatter hayr," the Scourge muttered, as he pulled steadily along, at the same time keeping a close watch upon the craft in the rear. "Yas, thar she comes, lickety scoot."

"Am I goin' ter let that galoot overhaul me, an' me got this start? Oh! no; not ef ther court's opinion aren't complicated. That chap either's a whisky spy, which hes bin layin' fer me, or else he ain't, an' it's sum other pilgarlic w'at's in fer wipin' out some old score. Good mind to phrenologize his skulp wi' a lead feeler, but thet would like's not fetch out a gang o' them distillers, which ain't ter my likin'. No! I reckon I'll tuck on the elbow-grease, an' let the chap have sum exercise."

"Laying to," as the sailors say, Buckhorn Bill pulled with all his strength, and his rude boat moved through the water at a lively rate. Every stroke with the rough bark sent the craft nearer and nearer to the island.

But the pursuer had the advantage of a small skiff with a sharp prow, and a good pair of oars; nor did the rower continually have to balance himself to keep from being dumped over into the lake. He came on at a speed to rapidly gain on Buckhorn Bill, and the Young Scourge was not slow to perceive such was the case.

"You'd better cum rather cautious, my festive gander," Bill muttered, with a compression of his lips, "fer I ain't ther most angelic-dispersitioned rooster ye ever didn't hear tell of."

But the pursuer came on.

Bill was able to discover that he was a rough-looking customer, and he had no doubt of his identity as one of the Press-Gang. So the Young Scourge brought his boat to a halt; then changed his position so that he faced the pursuer.

"Now, see hayr, you big-headed sucker—you doggin' pukel!" he cried, angrily, "jest hold up yer

hosses, or I'll put a red pepper inter your Phrenological Journal quicker'n Hell Gate war ruptured. What d'ye want?"

"I'll soon show ye!" growled the fellow, pulling on toward the Scourge. "Ruther reckon yer little race is run, my lad. Put down your shootin'-irons."

"Nary!" Bill replied, grimly, and the next moment he fired at the approaching ruffian.

But before he had time to note the effect of the shot, a lasso dropped suddenly over him, was drawn taut, and he was jerked head-foremost over into the water.

He had foes behind, it seemed, as well as in front.

CHAPTER X.

A VILLAINOUS AGREEMENT—ROYAL RALPH WINS BUT LOSES.

WE must now return to the little settlement of Squatterville, and to the cottage home of the trader, Whisky Bill Burdelle.

At the close of our third chapter, it will be remembered, we left Mrs. Prescott and Pearl in a state of anxiety and alarm, as they saw Burdelle approaching the cottage, accompanied by the rowdy loafer, Royal Ralph.

"Yes, child, run up-stairs, quick," Mrs. Prescott said, "and hide in the chimney-closet, for I would not have that Royal Ralph see you again. The very Old Nick, himself, is in the fellow, I do believe. If Burdelle asks for you, I'll tell him you've stepped out."

"But, dear, supposing Burdelle should catch you trying to deceive him? He would murder you."

"Do not fear for me, child," the housekeeper replied, in her quiet way. "Bill Burdelle knows he dare not offer me violence, even though he curses at me, and threatens. I hold a secret of his, the betrayal of which would hang him to a limb in short order. Go, now, for they're coming in and will see you."

Snatching a hurried kiss, Pearl ran up-stairs; but paused at the top, a startled expression upon her features.

"Royal Ralph means me harm," she whispered to herself, her beautiful eyes dilating with horror, "and he is getting Bill Burdelle to help him. Oh! God help me, if I have to fight villains as terrible as they."

Burdelle and his companion entered the little sitting-room of the cottage, where Mrs. Prescott was sitting, and the whisky-trader motioned Royal Ralph to a seat.

"Set down, Stanmere, and we will git to business, directly. Margaret, where is the gal?"

"Do you mean Pearl?" asked Mrs. Prescott, trembling with fear of what the consequences might be.

"Of course I mean Pearl!" he replied, gruffly. "Who else d'ye suppose I meant? One'd think to heer ye talk, thet I hed a house full of gals."

"Pearl has stepped out, somewhere," the reply came. "Perhaps she will be in soon."

"Yas, cuss ye, that's what ye allus say, but her soon is a couple of hours, every time. Ef she ain't coming soon, I'll break your head!"

"There is no present hurry about the girl, Burdelle," said Royal Ralph, in his smooth, oily tones. "Mebbe you won't need to call her; besides, I've seen her once or twice, and know she's got up in good shape."

"All right, then; just as you say. Draw yer chair up heer to the table, and we'll compare notes."

Royal Ralph did as requested, and with a bottle of liquor before them, the two men sat down at the table.

Burdelle was a man of some five-and-forty years, with a brawny, iron-wrought form and a dark, disagreeable countenance, which a career of evil and dissipation had made positively repulsive. His eyes were wild, haggard and bloodshot, and an expression of cruelty and sensualism lurked in the corners of his large mouth. His hair and goatee were black

and curling; his dress was buckskin, which was old and greasy. As if to prove that he was a thorough-going borderman, he carried conspicuously displayed in his belt a long unsheathed knife, and a heavy pair of "32" revolvers.

Royal Ralph was apparently not over thirty years of age, with a villainous-looking face, the prominent features of which were a long nose, bead-like black eyes, a pointed black mustache, and a low, beetling forehead with shaggy brows; and a form of medium height, well fattened by the excessive use of whisky, and the negligence of labor of any sort.

He was attired in buckskin, with more pretensions to taste than was observed by Whisky Bill, and wore simply a revolver in his belt.

As soon as the two were seated at the table, Whisky Bill turned to Mrs. Prescott:

"You can go out, Margaret," he said, gruffly. "We don't keer fer yer company, at present."

"I care not what you care for, Bill Burdelle," was the housekeeper's firm reply. "I was in this room before you came, and I shall not leave it."

"What! do you dare—"

"Yes, I dare to defy you, Bill, and you know it well enough. If I were to—"

"There! there! enough of that, you old she-cat!" he growled, savagely.

"Stanmere, we will proceed to business. You say I owe you five thousand dollars, which I lost at gambling, while I was drunk?"

"Exactly," the rowdy replied, lighting a cigar. "You played big and lost, an' gave me a paper mortgage on yer house an' prairie land fer the amount."

"Where is this mortgage?"

"Oh! I've got it safely put away, where I can soon get at it."

"In yer pocket, no doubt."

"Thet don't matter. Are ye reddy ter redeem it?"

"Wal, we'll see about thet. You sed ef I'd give ye the gal ter do with as ye pleased, you'd give me back the mortgage, eh?"

"I sed I'd give you back the mortgage, providing you made me the gal's guardian, an' told me how you cum by her—who were her parents."

"I cum by her natteral enough, when she war my first wife's only child, an' I her father."

"Get out!" Royal Ralph said, contemptuously.

"You're no more her father than I am."

"But I am, though."

"Get out, I say. I know better, and that ends the matter. The girl's no offspring of yours, nor are you in any way related to her. I think I can trace her identity through her features by a family resemblance. And, therefore, she is valuable to me—more so than your mortgage."

"Ah! indeed; but you haven't got her yet!" the whisky-trader sneered, with evil triumph.

"Well, if you don't give her to me on trade I shall foreclose the mortgage."

"Foreclose and be deviled!" Whisky Bill growled, fiercely. "You get me mad, and I'll jst about chaw yer ear off."

"I have no wish or intention to get you mad," Royal Ralph replied, calmly. "I only wish to barter with you. You must needs possess the mortgage, or lose your home. I want the girl for my own purposes. Can't we make a dicker?"

Whisky Bill drummed reflectively upon the table, in the meanwhile keeping an eye both upon Royal Ralph and Mrs. Prescott, who, though seemingly very busy with her needle-work, was pale and trembling.

"Waal, I'll tell you what we'll do," he said, after a few minutes. "We'll divide thet bottle o' stiff old rye atween us, an' throw dice—three hosses. Ther one thet wins is the winner, of course. If I win, you give me ther mortgage, or I'll cut yer throat. If you win you shall hev the girl and the mortgage, also or slit my weasand. Agreeable?"

"I reckon it's about fair," Royal Ralph replied,

grimly. "Break the nose off'm that p'izen, and let's get that part of the transaction done."

"I'll stump ye to put down a quart apiece!" the trader said, uncorking that bottle and producing another from the ideboard. "Et'll make our nerves steadier for the bizness before us."

And he laughed as if the proposal was liberal—and it was, in one sense.

"You can if you choose," Royal Ralph replied, with a cunning smile, "but a pint will do for me. Being of smaller stature, my capacity is naturally not as large as yours."

"Oh! that's nothing!" the trader remarked, with a guffaw. "I once know'd a little feller named La Muck, who ked put down six gallons of the raw stuff wi'out winkin'."

The bottle was broken and in a short time its contents were gone. Then Whisky Bill produced a d. ce-box and dice, five in number.

"You can throw first," he said, "an' ther game's ter be three hosses."

Royal Ralph shook the dice and dextrously rolled them out upon the table. Four aces lay revealed, and one tray. In the second flop he made the tray an ace.

"Five aces is hard to beat, my covey!" he said, with a grin.

Whisky Bill did not reply, but threw four trays and an ace; taking up the ace, he made it five trays.

"First horse for me," the rowdy said, coolly. "Go ahead."

Again they shook; result: five aces for Whisky Bill; three aces and two deuces for Stanmere; second horse awarded Whisky Bill.

The third horse was won by Stanmere, for he threw five aces at the first flop, to Whisky Bill's deuces!

"There!" he cried, triumphantly, "didn't I win the gal fair?"

"Yes, perfectly fair," Whisky Bill growled, angrily, "and she's yours to do with as you please. Of her connections I'll tell you nothing."

"All right; give me the gal an' let her history go to the devil!" the ruffian rowdy cried, eagerly. "Where is she? Here's your old mortgage—take it an' give me the gal."

"I reckon she's up-stairs, thar," answered Burdello, with a glance toward the stairway; "least-wise I've seen the old woman, heer, cast anxious glances that way. Ye can go up an' see fer yerself."

With an expression of devilish jubilation upon his evil face, Royal Ralph rose to his feet, but Mrs. Prescott also arose, and confronted him.

"Stop, you villain! You shall not go up there. Fly! fly! Pearl, for your life!" she screamed; but the next instant she was felled to the floor by a heavy blow, and Royal Ralph sprung up the stairway.

Whisky Bill followed at his leisure, and found the villain in a terrible rage, as he rushed furiously around.

"She's gone! she's gone!" he roared, swearing frightfully; "she's not here, and you know where she is, Burdelle."

"I reckon I ken tell you," the trader replied, grimly, pointing through an open window, far out upon the prairie beyond the settlement, where a horsewoman was dashing rapidly along. "That's yer bird, ef I ain't out o' reckoning. She's heard yer plot wi' me, an' hes took ter hoss. Ef you catch her, you'll hev ter git up before breakfast, fer thar ain't them around heer as can catch her."

"But I'll catch her, though!" Royal Ralph cried, and leaping through the window to the ground, he bounded away. Springing upon a horse which stood before the village store, he plunged the spurs into the animal's flanks, and dashed away in pursuit.

When he gained the prairie, he saw that Pearl was fully two miles away, and also that darkness and an oncoming storm were brooding. But his steed was apparently fresh, and he had strong hopes of overtaking the runaway.

And Pearl!

She was urging Pet, her Indian pony, to the very top of his speed in her endeavors to escape.

She saw Royal Ralph coming in pursuit the moment he left the settlement, and knew that it must be a desperate race—knew that it was to be a race for life and liberty with her. But, although she had the advantage of distance over her pursuer, she saw that Pet was not good for a great deal more work. She had ridden him well that afternoon, and knew that if his strength lasted against the freshness of Royal Ralph's horse it would be a miracle.

On—on, she dashed over the prairie, using both spurs to urge the faithful pony, glancing back occasionally only to perceive that the pursuer was lessening the intervening distance.

An hour passed, and darkness fell silently over the prairie, and the last glimpse Pearl caught of her foe was startling and horrifying to her. He was now scarcely a mile away.

"Oh! God help me," the Fairy of Squatterville muttered, as she peered back through the deepening gloom. "I am an outcast and fugitive on the face of the earth, even sold from my home. Where shall I go—what can I do to evade this monster who now claims me as his ward?"

There was no answer to her question, but the hard breathing and thud of Pet's hoofs upon the turf.

At last a thought struck her; she would turn in another direction, and in the dense darkness Royal Ralph would miss her. She therefore turned Pet's head to the westward, and urged him on, desperately determined to escape if possible.

On—on; the storm overhead threatened to break at every moment; then, she galloped fearlessly down into a prairie valley, where a camp-fire was blazing brightly.

Scarcely before she knew it, her pony was seized by the bit, and hurried forward into the camp, where a score or more of rough, villainous-looking men were lounging, all of whom were attired in crimson suits, and armed to the teeth.

"Hello, Armstrong, what hev ye got there?" demanded a portly, thick-set man, with long beard and half-mask to hide his features, as he rose to his feet—"a girl, by Jupiter!"

"Yes, captain, a reg'lar stunner. I found her back hayr, a-ridin' as if she war chased by the Old Nick hisself."

"Who are you, young lady?" the portly captain asked, drawing near.

"I am Pearl, the adopted daughter of Bill Burdelle, of Squatterville," was the faint reply, and poor Pearl shrunk instinctively from the gaze of the redly gleaming eyes through the mask.

"Eh? Burdelle's daughter? Well, that is strange. What sent you off here?"

Pearl related her story briefly, and looked around into the grim faces, supplicatingly.

"Well, here's quite a romance, I declare, and I really am surprised," said the captain. "My name's Coffin, miss, and these are my men. All I can do for you is to send you with one of my men to my mother's ranch, about ten miles from here. There you would be safe."

"Oh! I will go, then!" Pearl cried, unsuspecting of danger—"anywhere to escape the villain who is hunting me!"

Captain Coffin accordingly ordered one of his Prairie Pirates to mount, and convey the fugitive to his mother's ranch.

The man chosen, bowed, and left the camp, but soon returned upon a fine-looking horse, already equipped for the journey.

But, just at this juncture, hoof-strokes were heard, and Royal Ralph galloped boldly down into the camp. What did it mean?

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN COFFIN AND MAJOR STERLING MEETING AND REVIEWING THE PAST.

NONE seemed more agitated at the appearance of Royal Ralph, than the portly chief of the Whisky.

Ring, Captain Coffin. He started perceptibly at the advent of the villain, and a low, muttered execration escaped his lips.

Royal Ralph rode boldly forward, and raised his hat, with a smile, to poor Pearl, who was trembling and very pale.

"Good-evening, fair lady," he said, a peculiar glitter in his evil eyes. "I hope you are not any the worse for the interesting little race we had. Really, I am quite ashamed of the poor racing qualifications of my animal, and until I saw this fire-light down here, I quite despaired of finding you. You're mounted still, I perceive—perhaps you and your companion were coming in search of me; eh?"

"Oh! no;" and Pearl cast the villain a withering glance, "we were not going to hunt for wolves. You needn't have chased me, Ralph Stanmere, for I will not go with you."

"Ah! my beauty, but you *must*; I shall insist upon it, for you know I won you fairly from Whisky Bill, and you are mine. If you are fatigued, we will camp somewhere in this neighborhood until morning."

"No! I will not camp with *you*, anywhere. You have no claim upon me, and I will not go with you."

"But I swear you shall!" he cried, fiercely, gnawing at his mustache. "I'll have you if I have to fight Satan and all his imps."

He plunged the spurs into the bleeding flanks of his animal, and rode nearer to Pearl, but the pirate who was to be her conductor, quickly intercepted him.

"Hold, Harvey Bouton!" cried a stern, deep voice, and Royal Ralph started in alarm—"hold, where you are, for you come to the wrong place to enforce your villainous designs. Whisky Bill's daughter is under my protection, and you cannot have her. Do you comprehend?"

It was Captain Coffin who spoke, and he stood at Royal Ralph's side, with revolver in his grasp.

"Who are you?" the rowdy demanded, boldly.

"I won this girl fairly, and shall have her."

"No, I think not. Dwellyn, you ride ahead with the young lady, and take her to the place I directed. Be careful, and fulfill your trust faithfully, and you shall be rewarded. If this young braggadocio attempts to follow you, I'll attend to his case in the usual style."

And the click! click! of the captain's revolver illustrated what that style was.

With a bow, Dwellyn led the way out of the camp, and, glad to escape Royal Ralph, whom she was satisfied was an unprincipled knave, Pearl followed, on the back of her pony. Of course she knew nothing as to where she was being taken, but she felt that she could not fare worse than if she had suffered herself to go with Royal Ralph.

As for him, he could only vent his ill-feelings in oaths, for, covered by the steady aim of Captain Coffin's revolver, he dared not move in pursuit.

"You see that might is power, Bouton," the Whisky Chief observed dryly, as he held the young ruffian in abeyance.

"You said you'd have the girl, yet you are allowing her to slip nicely through your fingers. You see, I recognized you the minute you rode into camp, and I concluded to baffle you."

"Who are you?" Royal Ralph growled, his curiosity getting the better of his anger. "No one around these parts knows me by that name—"

"Except me," Coffin finished, with a grim smile.

"Come, you may as well dismount and accept the hospitalities of my camp."

"Curse you, no. I'll follow the girl!" was the reply, and the next moment the ruffian had dextrously flung himself out of the saddle into the grass. Coffin fired, but was not quick enough, for Royal Ralph had, with the agility of a snake, crawled away from the camp.

"Quick! quick!" roared the Whisky Chief, furiously, "after the accursed villain, and bring him back,

dead or alive. Five hundred dollars to those who capture him!"

Instantly there was a yelling response, and the camp was deserted, while a score of eager outlaws thrashed about over the prairie in search of the escaped ruffian. But, vain was their search. At the end of an hour they all returned to camp, empty-handed, for not a trace of Royal Ralph had been found.

With wonderful craft and cunning, he had succeeded in eluding them, and even now was striding away over the prairie, jubilant over his escape.

"It's too bad!" Captain Coffin growled, "but it can't be helped. I suppose. However, keep yer eyes open, and I will reward the one who will snoot the scoundrel on sight."

The day of Major Sterling's arrival at the camp of the Red Rifle Team was a pleasant one on the broad prairies, although the sun emitted a breath of extreme heat, for there was a freshening breeze blowing, and everything pertaining to nature seemed enjoying the tranquillity of the day.

After Captain Ned had seen that a rousing meal of fresh venison was prepared, Major Sterling satisfied his appetite; and, thinking all for the kind attention bestowed upon him, he stretched himself out for a nap, in the shade of the willow motte, close to the camp.

He slept peacefully until about sunset, and then mounted his horse with the expressed intention of taking a little gallop over the prairie for exercise.

"I'd advise you not to venture too far from camp, major," said Stockton, as the old gentleman was about to ride away. "There's a gang of outlaws in this neighborhood, belonging to a gigantic whisky-ring, who do not hesitate at the commission of any crime."

"Ay, ay! I am not unaware of that, my boy; but I am armed, and do not expect any danger. However, I will keep watch."

"You had best; and return, too, before the shadows of night fall over the prairies, for 'tis then that these vultures prey about."

Whereupon the major smiled understandingly and rode away.

He was a thorough equestrian, and a gallop to him was always invigorating, while to many it is fatiguing and depressing.

His animal, too, was a fine one and easy to ride, and the major rode gayly along over the prairie until he was far beyond sight of Stockton's camp.

Then when in a deep, natural ravine, which would seem to have been plowed by some mighty thunder-bolt, he recognized the fact that night was settling swiftly over the earth.

"Well, well! it is strange that my thoughts should have been so preoccupied as not to notice where I was going," he muttered, gazing around him into the gathering gloom. "Probably I shall have difficulty in finding my way back to camp. Ugh! this is a lonesome den, and I wonder my horse ever ventured down here."

"Things which are invisible sometimes lead one on to the brink of death," said a cool, mocking voice; and looking behind him with a startled exclamation, the major saw a horse and rider, not half a dozen yards away, come to a halt.

The man was burly, dressed in crimson buckskin, and armed, and Major Sterling instantly conjectured that he was one of the whisky outlaws of whom Stockton had warned him.

He was considerably startled, but too old a soldier to lose his self-composure. Turning his horse around so that he faced the stranger, he moved his hand toward his belt, but a click! click! in the direction of the masked outlaw, warned him to desist.

"You'd better not pull your pill-box!" the same cool voice spoke, "for 'tain't at all necessary to arouse the echoes of the night with any loud reports. Old friends need not quarrel nor need they come to serious blows."

Major Sterling scanned the man ahead of him as closely as the darkness would permit as he answered:

"I do not know what you mean, nor can I assign any motive for your meeting me here. If you want money, I'll permit you to take all you'll find upon my person."

"I do not want money, David Sterling—that is the least of all my wants. I came here, because it is the first time I have allowed myself to see or meet you in fourteen years!"

The major started up in his stirrups, his face grown ashen white in a single moment.

"My God! can it be you—Lewis Sterling?" he gasped, hoarsely, while again his hand sought the region of his belt.

"Yes, I am Lew Sterling, your beloved brother, or Captain Coffin, Chief of the Press-Gang!" the outlaw replied, with a strange chuckle. "There! there! Don't meddle with your weapons, I say, for I've got the drop on you, fine. Just be quiet and manifest your docility, and we'll get on all right."

"No! it will never be all right, between you and me, devil that you are!" the white-haired officer replied, fiercely. "My hatred for you is too deep for expression, and will be everlasting, even though birth has made you a brother of mine."

"Ah! those are hard words, David. What wrong have I ever done that you should thus hate me, the nearest of your kin now living? I remember nothing!"

"What! Remember nothing?" the major fairly yelled, a terrible passion rising in his heart and words—"dare you say, base hell-hound, that you remember nothing of wrong you have done me? Bah! I see your drift—you would mock at my misery, because of the atrociousness of your past villainy. Min, I have followed you all these fourteen years, for revenge. At last we have met—met, and here we must fight."

"Oh! well, if it's fight you're after, I reckon I can accommodate you." Coffin said, grimly. "But, first, I want you to rehearse the drama, to see if your memory is just and accurate. Time, you know, makes great changes, both in body, mind and memory."

"Yes, but do you think I could ever forget? *Never!* Why rehearse the story?—'tis only one of great bitterness to me. You remember it all—how; in our young manhood, we, twin brothers, fell in love with the same belle of our native village; how you at first were the favored one, until by your constant inebriation and badness you fell from grace, and I took your place in the affections of Clara Stanford. She found that I had at least the promise of manhood in me, and took me as a husband and protector. One short year were we married; then after the birth of our twin babes, the Rebellion broke out, and my patriotic spirit was restless until my dear wife became enthused, and bade me leave her and the children and go and fight for the country of my birth. I kissed them good-by—forever, as it turned out, and enlisted in the regular arm of the Union."

"I was absent a matter of two years, and then returned home on a furlough. That was fourteen years ago this month. Ah! God, what a home I found—desolate, and wifeless and childless! My Clara, they told me, was dead—had been murdered! and I was now four months under the sod. Of my children nothing was known, except that they had disappeared at the time of my wife's death. Foul murder and abduction had been perpetrated, but upon no one could suspicion be safely attached—not until I missed you from the village, and was told that you had left the place three months before for the West. Then I suspected you, knowing of your past defeat and terrible jealousy—suspected you, and grew to hate you with a deadly rancor. And if it could be, that hate assumed three-fold proportions when I found the letter you had left for me, declaring your agency in the work, and that it was only the beginning of your revenge. For a time I believe I was crazed, but I went back to the army and fought

like a devil inspired, until the war ended. Then, I turned my footsteps westward in search of you."

"And at last you have found me," Captain Coffin said, with a malicious chuckle; "and yet what does it avail you? I have you in my power, thanks to this revolver, and to raise a hand against me only forfeits your life. So be peaceful, for I do not wish your blood upon my hands, because I have dipped them deep enough in crime already."

"Tell me where are my children?" Major Sterling said, watching the outlawed brother narrowly; "tell me where, and deliver them up to me. Then, and only then, will I let the dead past bury the past."

"Tell you!" the Whisky Captain sneered malignantly; "no!—not if I were to die this coming moment. Through them it is my purpose to strike you a deeper blow. I have them in my possession yet—both grown up to beauteous womanhood. They would make society belles, if you could introduce them to the East. But you cannot have that pleasure, for I have a horrible fate in store for each. Pearl, the prettiest, shall marry one of the most repulsive and brutal wretches I can single out on the whole border, and Molly shall become the squaw of old Red Nose, the Sioux warrior—a chief with worse qualities than Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull combined."

"You demon!" the major gasped, writhing in his saddle. "Would that God might strike you dead where you sit!"

"But He won't, Brother David, for I and He are on friendly terms. Now, then, I want to advise you to forever abandon the hope of getting possession of your children, or injuring me, for it is an impossibility. Go back to your eastern home in your coming dotage, and die in the Lord. Should I ever happen out that way, I'll have a fence-rail erected at your head as a token of my memory and esteem. But, whatever you do, be careful that you fall not in with me again, nor with my men, for your life shall pay the forfeit. The girls you shall *never* see, if I have to cut their throats and bury them in the bottom of Loon Lake. Adieu, David!"

And suddenly wheeling his horse, the Whisky Chief dashed into the timber which flanked one side of the ravine, and was gone.

Major Sterling pulled his revolver and fired, but without effect, as a wild, exultant yell proclaimed.

Captain Coffin had escaped, unharmed. With an expression of undaunted resolution, the major rode up out of the ravine, and galloped rapidly toward the camp of the Red Rifle Team.

CHAPTER XII.

A FISH THAT BROKE THE LINE—AVENGING THE PAST—BUT CAUGHT AT LAST.

WHEN Buckhorn Bill found that it was impossible to save himself from being jerked over into the water, he caught his breath, and was prepared for the bath. Over he was 'yanked' by the lasso, and down he went into the water out of sight.

But, ever ready of wit and quick of action, he was not idle, even while under the water. He knew that the enemy now had a lasting hold upon him, and that unless he broke it, his fate was sealed. So many times had he eluded the whisky ruffians, he believed they would instantly put him to death, as soon as he was surely in their power.

Fortunately, the rope had drawn tight about his body, just above his elbows, leaving the lower part of his arms free; and as he sunk beneath the cool waves, he quickly darted his right hand to his belt, and drew his knife. Sweeping it around as far as he could reach, he was successful in finding the cord. A blow severed it, and he sunk deeper, and knew that he was once more free!

He began rapidly to rise toward the surface, but made desperate efforts at swimming, and when he did come up, it was some distance from where he went down.

But he was not yet out of danger—indeed, a horrible discovery stared him in the face!

From every direction men were swimming toward him—human sharks, by the dozens—he could faintly distinguish them, and also saw the boats of the whisky-ring floating idly about, here and there. Despairing of ever catching the dreaded Scourge by boat, the ruffians had taken to water, and forming a complete circle around him, had him nicely caged.

Buckhorn Bill perceived this at a glance, and for once was forced to admit to himself that the chances for life were slim. He had never been in quite so close a trap, and it was a puzzle to him to know how he was to get out. He had yet his knife, and one revolver in his bosom pouch, but was powerless to use them, for it required the use of both hands to keep him afloat, to say nothing of fighting.

The approaching ruffians were in the same fix, but there were enough of them to take him without raising a weapon.

A glance around, and Buckhorn Bill espied his log conveyance, upon which he had ventured out upon the lake. It was but a few yards off; half a dozen perhaps, while the approaching foes averaged a distance of thirty or forty yards. In that same glance the Boy Scourge also made another discovery. A boat was coming out toward them, from the eastern shore, but there was no one visible in it, although the oars worked regularly in their locks!

At another time, Bill's curiosity would have been aroused, but now he did not give the matter thought, as he swam swiftly for the log, and gained and crawled upon it, after which he wasted a precious moment in giving an ear-splitting blast upon his buckhorn.

In moments of triumph this was a never-failing habit of his.

A savage yell followed from the Press-Gang, but they were powerless to do aught but yell, for the stiff evening breeze which was blowing out across the water, had carried their boats out of easy reach. And this was a point in favor of Buckhorn Bill. So long as his ammunition lasted, he would hold his enemies at his mercy!

Dropping his buckhorn, he quickly opened his water-tight breast-pocket, and out came his precious revolver to do its deadly work. First he took those nearest, as they came, until every cartridge in his seven-shooter was emptied, and therefore had seven of the whisky roughs sunk forever beneath the waves.

But, Buckhorn Bill fought not these human sharks alone, for death-yells rent the air which his bullets did not occasion; and yet there were no reports of other weapons than his own!

He knew the reason, without giving a glance of inquiry around.

Death Shadow, the mysterious avenger, was near, with his noiseless gun; it was his skiff which Bill had seen approaching from the eastern shore. He did glance around, however, after he had emptied his revolver, but though he saw the boat, and the gleaming barrel and muzzle of a rifle, he could see nothing of the avenger, but the top of a bear-skin cap.

But, swift as had been the retribution which had overtaken the outlaws, those remaining unscathed were still pressing forward, and some of them were not a dozen yards away. Then he heard a quick report, close at hand, felt a sharp, stinging sensation in the region of his temple—staggered, lost his balance and all became a blank as he sunk once more in the lake.

When he awoke, he gave a gasp—it was like coming out of a dream.

He was not in the water, nor on the ground of the forest or prairie. Instead, he was lying upon a rude, straw-filled mattress, which was supported by an iron bedstead, in a little room, with two small windows up near the ceiling, and a door. The floor was of rough timber, unplanned, and the furniture consisted of but a common deal-table, on which a candle dimly burned, and a single chair.

The room had evidently been made for a prison, as the door was thick, heavy, and banded with iron, and there were iron bars at the windows.

Buckhorn Bill noticed these things with an observing glance, as he sat upon the edge of his cot and wondered greatly where he was.

"I reckon these 'ere surroundings belong to the Press-Gang, an' thet I'm in their den!" he muttered, rubbing away a few drops of blood that had coagulated upon his forehead, from the bullet bruise he had received upon the lake. "Wish I knowed where I am, anyhow. Seems like a prison in heer, and likely it is. S'pect I'll hev a visit from Captain Coffin, directly, and then I'll get blessed accordin' to St. Matthew."

Feeling tired and weak, he did not immediately arise, but waited until he felt more rested. Then he arose to his feet, and began a closer observation of his prison. As he walked to and fro, the floor beneath his feet rocked, which convinced him that his prison was upon water—indeed, he could hear the water lapping against the outside.

On trying the door he found it to be securely fastened upon the other side, which was convincing proof that he was in a prison.

"Guess they've got me tight enough this time," he muttered, as he stood still and gazed around within the limits of the apartment, at loss how to act. "Durned if I know what to do. It's mighty certain that it won't be healthy for me to remain here long, unless the whisky devils are more lenient than I expect. And the walls and floors are too strong for me to break through."

Going back to the cot, he sat down and buried his face in his hands. Generally he was quick to plan, but now he could think of none. His prison was invincible.

"Wonder how old Death Shadow got out of the muss, and who the old varmint is?" he muttered. "I reckon between us thet we released about a dozen or fifteen spirits, and I only wish that it had been more, for poor mother and Maolin would rest easier in their graves. What kin a feller see, through them windows, up there?"

Making as little noise as possible, he placed a chair upon the rough table, and peered out. What he saw but completed his former theory. His prison was upon a monster boat or barge—he had never seen a craft of such dimensions, never having seen the ocean shipping. The float was built of logs, withed and roped together, and these in turn were covered with a rude plank floor. Judging from what he could see by peering out of the two opposite windows of his prison, Buckhorn Bill put the width of the barge at a hundred feet by a length of two hundred. Upon it were several ten-by-twelve box-houses, similar to what he calculated his was, but aside from these the floor was empty.

Nor could he see any signs of animated life within the scope of his vision. As his prison stood, the two windows looked out the two lengths of the boat, or barge in the westward and in the eastward directions, he judged by the stars, and reflection of moonlight upon the island, which was at one end of the float. He decided that the strange craft was lying on water of a "hide" or bayou at the western side of the island. To this bayou there was a channel entrance in the shape of an S, inverted, of sufficient width to admit of the passage of the barge. The shores of the passage, however, were thickly timbered with a mixture of balsams and reeds of extraordinary height, so that from the western shore of Loon Lake the existence of the snug pocket or bayou would not have been suspected. At the eastern end of the barge, the shore of the island was visible, the rough, rocky ground stretching back and upward, until it was lost in a wilderness of green balsams. Also, at the nose of the barge upon the shore, was built a low pier, the top of it ranging even with the deck of the barge. Upon this there were several barrels standing.

"At last the secret of the whisky distillery is no

longer a mystery," Buckhorn Bill muttered, excitedly. "It is located upon this isolated island, and this barge is used to transport the whisky ashore. Hurra! I'm now glad I escaped death to meet imprisonment, here, for it has been a revelation."

He watched for awhile until he grew tired; then descended from his perch, and replaced the chair and table.

"If the varmints would only've left me my shootin'-irons and knife, I'd make et sultry for 'em yet," he muttered, "but I hain't got so much as a weapon. I wonder how I shall manage it, for I'm bound not to give in, as long's there's any hope."

He sat down again, and knitted his brows, thoughtfully, his plain, good-natured face growing handsome, unconsciously, in his eager devotion to the studying of the problem of what course was best to pursue.

The night wore on slowly, and it seemed as if it regretted exchanging places with morning, so earnestly did it hang on. But at last the light came in through the barred windows, and Buckhorn Bill knew that dawn was breaking.

He raised his head, a look of resolve upon his face.

"Some of the gang'll be coming, soon," he muttered, "and it's my only chance to escape death, though I don't know if I can make a successful corpse."

He however made preparations; it was, as he had said, his only chance for prolonged life. Picking open the wound upon his forehead, he allowed the blood to ooze out and down upon his cheek. Then he laid himself down upon the couch, in a position similar to that in which he had found himself lying, when he regained his consciousness.

Then he waited. It was his hope that some of the outlaws would come soon, and then, on seeing that he was insensible, would leave the door open, or mayhap give him a chance to grab a weapon and fight for his life and liberty.

Nor was he disappointed in their coming. An hour of waiting and suspense dragged by; then there was a tramp of heavy-booted feet, the door was unlocked, partly opened, and a shaggy head thrust into sight.

"Come in, pals," said the owner of the head, the next moment. "The boy's a 'stiff,' I guess—layin' jest w'ar we put him."

Rather stealthily the leader, Captain Gregg, and three other ruffians crept into the room; but they locked the door behind them and stood aloof, with drawn revolvers.

"Yas, he's deader'n a door-nail," Gregg observed, slyly-concealing a shudder. "I know'd et, when we fetched him in."

"What'll ye do wi' him?—toss him inter the lake?"

"No! not yet—not till ther chief returns."

"Goin' to leave him heer, then?"

"Yas; might as well. Don't reckon he'll smell, till Coila returns."

The villains then turned and left the room, and Buckhorn heard the door lock behind him, which told him he was not to escape, yet.

He laid for some time, revolving different plans over in his mind, but settling on none, definitely.

At last he arose, and first drank of, and then washed in a bucket of fresh water which he found at the head of his cot. He was just finishing, and drying his face, when he heard a key grate in the lock, and saw the door of his prison cautiously open.

CHAPTER XIII.

TURTLE TOM AND ELEPHANT TOM.

THERE had been an inactive witness to the capture of Buckhorn Bill, by the Press-Gang, upon the lake at night, who was no less a person than Turtle Tom, whom, it will be remembered, Bill left on the eastern shore of the lake, on the night he was first decoyed by the outlaws.

The young trapper had been forced to leave the neighborhood, because of the presence of so many

foes, and had scouted about in the adjacent woods until the following night, when he had emerged upon the northern shore, just in time to witness the scene in which Buckhorn fell from the log upon being wounded, and was gobbled up and borne away to the island by the human sharks who had surrounded him.

Efforts had also been made by the outlaws to capture the mysterious avenger, old Death Shadow, but in his boat he had quickly put them at distance, and disappeared far down the lake.

After seeing the outlaws disappear upon the Balsam Island, Turtle Tom turned sorrowfully away from the shore back into the forest aisles, where the moonlight occasionally made long bars of light.

"It's too bad that Buckhorn should go under," he muttered, "for he's about as square sort of fellow as there is along the border; but I don't see how I'm to go to his rescue alone. I've had my experience on that accursed island, an' ain't so jolly to renew it," and here a shadow stole over the handsome features of the young trapper. "I can't b'lieve Bill's more'n stunned, an' ef he ain't, 'tain't likely they'll finish him up until Coffin goes back to head-quarters. Ere that time, I must contrive to rescue Bill somehow. I suspect they'll cage him on the old barge, or else take him up into the distillery. It must be pretty near time, too, for them to make a run."

"Ef ye mean by thet their race is purty near run, I do solemnly agree wi' ye!" spoke a voice, and a heavy hand slapped him on the shoulder. "Did ye see 'em scoop in Buckyhorn William, Tomassetty?"

"Yes, I saw 'em," the young trapper replied, wheeling around. "Hello! Old Elephant, by all that's joyful! Jove! you're the last man I expected to meet. How are you?"

"Fat and healthy, Tom, but alas! fallen from my mission o' tryin' ter Christianize Injuns an' white cusses ter ther common level uv a scout and skulptanner. Whv, Tomassetty dear, ef ye'd seen ther hooman skulps I've tuk durin' ther last two a'nums, ye'd be skeerd. I manyfacter ther hide inter shammy-skins an' use ther hair ter make false mustaches with fer young men as can't raise 'em. But where've you bin this year or so? Don't remember of seein' you."

"No. You are the second one that has seen me since a year ago. I've been serving out an apprenticeship at making barrels and bungs and whisky," with a wave of his hand toward the island, and a bitter laugh.

"What! you hain't bin out o' ther victims o' Cap Coffin's Press-Gang, hev yo, T'omas?"

"I have, unfortunately; and only escaped a few days ago, though I've been tryin' faithfully ever since I was forced into ther toils. But of this enough, until some other time. You saw the devils get Buckhorn Bill?"

"Lordy, yes! an' et r'iled my blood so thet et boiled up an' e'ena'most slopped over. Reckon ef my gun ked hev spit her compliments thet fur, I should hev disregarded ther holy commandments, an' made a few more human stiffs. Poor Bill! he was ther pure quill, cl'ar through 'n' through, war Bill."

"A fine fellow, and one to be pitied, for it is a hard rub to lose one's parents, Elephant; I know it by experience. To be sure mine warn't fu'st-class—that is, warn't educated up to the top-notch, nor high-toned, like sum, but they war good, all the same, an' many a red nigger's bit the dust in pay fer their slaughter. But, Elephant, do you believe that Bill's dead?"

"Dunno, T'omas; kinder appears to me thet he drapped in ther nateral fashion."

"I know; but I don't think he was more than stunned, or else the Press-Gang wouldn't have touched him."

"Yas—mebbe ye're right there."

"And in the case that he's alive we must go to his rescue."

"Exactly. We ken't let ther lad be ebawed up by them onmannerly galoots. Ef ye've bin on the island, I reckon ye know how the land lays."

"Yes. We cannot go alone—must have a larger force."

"Then, I've jist a prime ijeer, scooped up frum ther depths uv my kernoodleum. Thar's a party o' chaps camped out back here on the prairie, what's bin sent down heer by the Goveynerment, ter hunt down these illicit distillers, and their leader's the young detective, Captain Ned Stockton. He an' Buckhorn Bill used ter be friends a couple years ago, an' you bet Ned'll be glad ter give us a lift."

"Your plan is good. I am slightly acquainted with Stockton myself. Shall we at once go for them?"

"No, not till mornin'; daylight is best for our purpose. So let's camp down heer, and wait. I've got a little dockyment I want to show ye."

Searching for a time in the belt of dense forest, they at last found a secluded little hollow in the shade of a huge shelving rock, where all was of midnight darkness. Turtle Tom built a little blaze of dry twigs, and then the two men threw themselves upon the bed of leaves, which covered the ground.

"Heer's the dockyment I mentioned," said O'd Elephant, producing a crumpled sheet of note-paper, and handing it to Turtle Tom. "I manyfactured a stiff back yere to-night, and found this in ther chap's pocket. Reckon mebbey you ken decipher them Len-tracks, eh?"

"Yes," said the young trapper, smiling. "I fortunately am in this secret. This paper is the dispatch of the Whisky Ring. These hieroglyphics and scrawls are printed from an electrotyped plate in the hands of the President of the league at old Fort Alexander. He supplies Coffin and every acting member of the Ring with packages of these papers. What you see here is simply to blind and puzzle you—the writing is in milk, on the other side."

Holding the paper over the heat of the blaze, the trapper soon had all the writing drawn out, visible to the naked eye. The following was the message, which he read aloud:

"CAPTAIN COFFIN:—A day or two after you receive this, an *emigrant* wagon-train will (as usual) camp on the eastern shore of Loon Lake. They are poor and needy, and if you can give them anything, do it, cautiously and expeditiously, and send them away.
P. W. R."

"Waal! waal!" observed Elephant, drawing away at his pipe, "what do et mean?"

"Mean? It means that the usual wagon-train which transports the illicit whisky to the Northern Pacific Railroad will soon arrive here upon the lake-shore for their load. But we must make it our point to watch for them, and see that they never take away their cargo of hell-fire. I wish Buckhorn Bill were here with us, fer he'd make us a good leader, and would make victory a great victory as an inevitable consequence. He succeeds in nearly all he undertakes!"

"But he ain't out, an' won't be till we git him."

"Not unless he has aid from another source," Tom replied, thoughtfully, "as I hope he will have."

Little more was said, but the fire died out and the two scouts dropped off into a sound, refreshing sleep.

At the first approach of day they were astir, however, and after breakfasting on dried venison, of which Elephant always carried a supply in his haversack, they set out for the camp of the Red Rifle Team.

It was a distance of eight miles, and therefore the sun was climbing well toward the meridian, ere they reached the camp.

Here, of course, they were accorded a warm welcome by Captain Ned and his men, for Stockton was personally acquainted with Turtle Tom, while he had heard much of Old Elephant by report.

First of all the men were treated to a good dinner,

and then Tom related much of what is known to the reader, and plans were discussed and formed.

So that long ere the shadows of night came on the scouts and whisky-hunters were *en route* for Loon Lake.

Buckhorn Bill gazed at the opened door in great astonishment, and saw a small girlish figure glide into the room—then sprung forward, joyfully, with the exclamation:

"Molly Miner, as I live!"

"Yes, Nolly Miner—better known as Whisky Bill's daughter!" the girl replied, advancing fearlessly, and extending her hand. "I am sorry to see you in this predicament, Mr. Burnham."

"So am I, Molly. Lut, see hayr; s'pos'in' you drop the Mister. Buckhorn Bill's good enuff fer me."

"Very well; I'll call you Bill then, or—Willie," the Nymph of the Lake replied, a faint color tinging her brown cheeks. "You ought to have kept away from the lake, as I warned you, and then nothing would have happened, perhaps, to you."

"I know you did, dear Molly, but the human mind and heart ever yearn for greater knowledge, an' I wanted ter discover the topography uv this island, or bu'st—an' I bu'sted."

"Exactly!" the girl replied, with a smile. "I am sorry you have got in the power of the gang. But, how did you do when Gregg and his fellows came? They said you were quite dead, and I came to see, for I didn't believe it."

"Oh! I played possum—layed just whar they put me, an' looked the best I know'd how like a nattered 'stiff;' an' the orgainly cowards war 'fraid ter cum near me. So they rendered their verdict, while standin' at a distance, an' departed."

And Bill laughed outright at the absurdity of his performance. But something else was on his mind—for he added:

"Do you know thet Whisky Bill, as you call him, is the father of another child in Squatterville?"

"I know nothing of the kind, sir," the girl replied, accepting the chair she had heretofore declined. "The Pearl of the Prairies is no child of Whisky Bill's. He has told me that he was never married."

"Hal! this a revelation."

"Yes. He made it to me once, out of spite, I guess. He told me that Pearl Prescott was related to me, but did not say how near. He moreover said that we were of the name Sterling, but I chose the name of Miner, until I was sure of the right one."

"How long, then, have you been with these illicit whisky outlaws?"

"Ever since my earliest recollection. They were down in Colorado, until four years ago, when they came up here. I used to have a Texan lady companion, who taught me, but she is now dead."

"Then you have never tried to escape from the outlaws?"

"No, for I should not have known where to go; besides, I have always had a home, such as it was, and my freedom, and was respected by Whisky Bill and the rest of the gang, except Captain Coffin. He has often been rude and even brutal to me, but th's was only in times when Bill Miner, or Bill Furdelle, as you know him, was absent at Squatterville."

"Do you think you would like to leave here now and go out into the world, where you would be happier?"

"I don't know, for I've never given the matter any thought. Besides, no one would want me and I should be shunned, while here I am in no society but my own."

"Maybe I can contrive to get you away from here soon!" Bill said, thoughtfully. "Could you trust yourself to go with me?"

"Maybe—I don't know," she replied, a flush mounting her forehead, and prettily crimsoning her cheeks. "But, I must go, now, for I don't want to be caught here by the outlaws. Should they pay you another visit, play dead again. It will give me a chance to

work out your escape. To-night a cargo of whisky will be loaded, and, then, when the train arrives, the boat will put out for the eastern shore. Be watchful and hopeful, and I'll try to get you out. Good-by."

"Good-by, and may God bless you," the young Scourge said, fervently, as she turned away, perhaps to conceal the sad impression that grew upon her face, as she thought that it might be impossible for her to help him escape.

In a moment she had left the prison, and Bill heard the key grate once more in the lock.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EMIGRANT TRAIN—LOADING THE BARGE—TWO HANDS GOOD—FOUR BETTER.

THE Red Rifle Team arrived on the lake-shore at moon-rise, that night, and after pitching their camp back in the woods, Captain Ned, Turtle Tom, and Old Elephant started forth to make observations. Major Sterling was also along, for since he had learned that Captain Coffin was the man they were after, the old officer had strong hopes of finding his two lost daughters.

After arriving at the eastern edge of the lake, they stopped and scrutinized the waters, upon which the moon shed a spectral light.

None of the outlaws' boats were in sight, to excite suspicion; the lake lay like a deserted desert of blue; far away, to the naked eye, looked the Balsam Island, which Turtle Tom pointed out as a stronghold and distillery-place of the whisky ring.

"It's a bad place to make an attack!" said Ned Stockton, at an instant glance. "You see the devils could lie in the shade and pick us off, should we attempt to reach the spot. How many are there, Frailey, on that island?"

"I reckon you've got me there, captain!" Turtle Tom replied, scratching his head. "I never counted 'em. But I reckon thar must be about fifty regulars, aside from the gang under Coffin—the Press-Gang, properly. Thar's sum twenty or thirty uv them."

"And then there are slaves, eh?—or rather, men who have been pressed into service."

"Yes—about twenty more of them, among whom are several old prairie scouts, hunters, trappers, and farmers, some of them from Burnham's colony."

"Indeed! would they fight for the whisky ring?"

"They are bitter over the brutality that has been extended them, an' I reckon they'd all fight fer liberty, if they had weapons."

"Well, then, leaving them out of the question, altogether, we have some seventy or eighty roughs to contend with?" said Captain Ned.

"Yes, I guess them's 'bout the figgers of the case."

"Then, you see, we've got to go slow and work sharp to attain a victory. Ten men—yes, twelve men against eighty, is scarcely worth speakin' of; yet we may be able to accomplish wonders. Buckhorn Bill we cannot help, at present."

They went back to the camp, and then Captain Ned dispatched five of his men to keep guard at different points on the lake-shore, while he lit his pipe and spent a full hour in unbroken reflection. He then spoke.

"I see but one way to accomplish anything satisfactorily," he said, addressing those who were gathered near the camp fire, "and this is my plan. Coffin and his gang will soon go back to the island, probably, and we won't hinder them. When the whisky caravan arrives, we will ascertain the force they have, and if possible take them prisoners. Then, I will dispatch some one to the island, to let the outlaws know of the train's arrival, and they—a part of them will come ashore with the whisky."

"Good, so far," nodded Turtle Tom, approvingly. "There is generally about fifteen men come with the barge."

"Well, then, a swift, sudden attack will use them up, and—"

"You have sixty odd men on the island yet to get," suggested Old Elephant. "How about them?"

"We'll see to that afterward. It is better not to plan too much work at a time. If we get a score of the devils alive, I won't complain."

An hour passed, and then one of the guards came in with the announcement that Captain Coffin and his Press-Gang were crossing the lake toward the Balsam Island.

"Let 'em go!" commanded Captain Stockton. "We're too weak in numbers to attempt to capture them."

"Yes, for they are devils in a fight," said Turtle Tom. "I heard one of the 'slaves,' as those are called who have been pressed into service, say that four years ago, Captain Coffin and the gang massacred a party of soldiers down in Colorado, and scalped them all, and the crime was attributed to the red-skins."

"No doubt; but the cusses 'll get their necks stretched when it's found out."

The remainder of the night passed without any great amount of conversation; nor was the tranquillity of the camp disturbed.

But early in the morning there were strange noises heard on the clear air—the rumble of heavy squeaking wagons, and the shouts and curses of oxen-drivers, not far away from the camp of the Rifle Team.

"It's the whisky bull-train," announced Turtle Tom.

"And they're so near that it will be necessary for us to change the location of our camp!" said Stockton. "We'll hurry and get away further to the north, and then make a reconnoissance of the train."

Accordingly, the main body of the men were called in, and a spot for the new camp was selected about a mile further up the north shore.

Then, Stockton and Turtle Tom set off toward the place where they expected to find the train. They moved with exceeding caution, for it was far from desirable that they should be discovered.

"I think I have the best idea yet," said Turtle Tom, as they advanced. "Your red uniform greatly resembles the darker crimson ones worn by the Press-Gang. At least, I don't think the ignorant ruffians in charge of the train would recognize the difference. On each time when they arrive at the lake, it is customary for them to send a negro over to the island to inform Coffin of their arrival. Now, then, you're to go into their camp, and represent yourself as one of the ring, and offer to ride the nigger to the island in a boat, where he generally has to float or swim on a log. You then can bring him into camp, and we'll thoroughly bull-doze him."

"After we've found out what we want, I'll black up with some preparation I have, and go to the island. I'll tell Coffin, and take the liberty of the camp, and see what I can do for Buckhorn Bill."

"Still better," said Stockton, "mebbe you'd better don my togs and visit the train yourself, for you're better acquainted with the nature of the business."

"Very well; for, come to think, the nigger, Joe, has seen me at work in the distillery, and no suspicion of our game will be created. I also know the drivers, generally, by name."

The two young men accordingly exchanged garments, after which they stole on.

In due time they gained a position in the woodland, from where they could look down upon the camp of the bull-train, camping in a little glade close to the shore of the lake.

There were eight canvas-covered prairie schooners, each of which was drawn by two teams of burly oxen.

A camp-fire had been built upon the ground, and around this six half-breed women were engaged in toasting recently killed venison.

Nine men were lounging around, being for the most part octo-breeds, or Texans, while among them one negro was conspicuous.

"It's a hard-looking gang," said Stockton. "If we take them so easily, I'll be surprised."

"You'd better attack them at night," Tom replied, "before it's time for the barge to come ashore. By the time you've killed or taken them, you'll have your hand in for the others."

Stockton then took his leave, and the young trapper waited but a few moments, ere he advanced boldly into the camp.

His coming created no manifestations of surprise among the bogus emigrants, for they simply stared at him.

"Is Bug Terral here?" Turtle Tom demanded, taking a seat on one of the huge hubs of the wagon wheels, with utmost composure.

"Yes, I reckon I'm that individual, young feller," said a brawny, bloated rough, who supported the heaviest beard Tom had ever seen. "What d'ye want, heer?"

"Waal, I reckon'd you war the train w'at's cum after the whisky," was the reply, "so I left off my notion o' huntin', an' cum down to see. Sent yer nigger over yet?"

"No, but I was jest a-thenkin' o' sendin' him. Coffin's expectin' us, I suppose, ain't he?"

"I guess not, particularly, fer all ther president's messages have been waylaid and captured by hunters. Ther w'isky's purty neer ready, I guess though; so ef ye're goin' ter send yer nigger he kin ride over in the boat, if he comes along with me."

"All right—go 'long wi' ye, Joe, you cuss, an' stay till the barge comes over. Ef I see yer black bazzoo on this shore before that time, I'll skin ye."

Joe, who was a sensible fellow, profited by the rude train-master's advice, and in company with Turtle Tom was seen hurrying back through the forest toward the camp of the Red Rifle Team. As soon as they arrived there, the astonished darky was seized and bound hand and foot, and the muzzle of a revolver held against his forehead with the threat that if ye yelled, he would get the contents of the weapon.

"Now, then, you black rascal!" said Captain Ned, assuming as stern an aspect as possible, "what's your name?"

"Joseph Snow, sir!" was the reply.

"Snow, eh? Well, that is a rather bad joke, I must say—on the snow. Now, Joseph, do you know what I'm going to do with you, if you don't answer all I ask you?"

"No, sir!"

"Well I'm goin' ter make a black angel of you, if you don't disgorge; and mind, you get the same, if you lie to me. Now, then, answer straightforward, and I'll be mild with you. Do you belong to this Whisky Ring?"

"No, sir; I work for Bug Terral."

"You've often been over to the island?"

"Ye-, s'r, very of'n."

"And know Cap Coffin?"

"Yer, sir, jes' as well as I know myself."

"Do you have your liberty, and do as and go where you please, while on the island?"

"Yer, sir."

"Can in the distillery?"

"Yer, sir."

"That's all, at present. Tom, I guess it will be safe for you to venture across."

Accordingly Tom re-exchanged clothes with Captain Ned, and then with Joe Snow, after which he blacked up, and all the rangers declared that he was a clever counterfeit of the genuine Snow—almost Snow himself.

In his prison on the whisky barge, Buckhorn Bill took the remainder of the day easy, after the departure of Molly Miner, the Nymph. He knew there was no way in which he could escape until he received aid from outside; and therefore he resolved not to worry nor chafe in his confinement, but make the best of it until something turned up.

A short time after sunset a man came and lit two

headlights, one on each end of the boat, and then took his departure. It was these lights, or rather, one of them, which Bill had previously seen upon the lake.

Not long had the man been gone, when the door was again unlocked, and Molly Miner hurriedly entered Bill's presence.

"You're to have company," she said, speaking rapidly, "and likewise a chance for escape, which you must improve to the best of your ability. The gang have got possession of your old sweetheart, Pearl Prescott, and Ugly Gregg has ordered her to be locked up in here with you, he believing you to be a corpse."

"Rather a lively corpse!" Buckhorn grinned. "What else?"

"Well, I have equipped her, unbeknown to the gang, with a saw, an auger, and two loaded seven-shooters. You must saw a hole through this southern wall, which is thin and opens directly upon the water, and then trust to your luck in escaping. If possible I will be near at hand."

And ere Bill could find words to properly express his thanks, she was gone.

Night came on slowly, it seemed to the anxious young Scourge, but at last heavy footsteps shook the barge once more, and the door of the prison was unlocked, opened, and a person pushed rudely inside; then it was jerked quickly shut and locked again.

"Bill!" called a clear, anxious voice, "are you here?"

"You bet I am!" was the low reply, and Buckhorn advanced and warmly clasped both of the Prairie Pearl's hands in his. "I'm sorry to see you here, Pearl; but we cannot waste time. If you have the saw and an auger, let me have them."

Pearl retreated into the darkness a moment, and then came forward with the tools. Bill seized the auger, and began the work of escaping by attacking the southern wall of the building.

He bored several holes through, to make a pathway for his saw, and then dropped the auger, and the saw took its place. After watching him work a few moments, Pearl stepped forward.

"You bore you another path, and let me manage this saw!" she said, bravely. "My arms are strong, and if two hands are good, four may certainly be a little better."

"But this is too heavy work for you," Bill declared, in surprise.

"No! no! hurry; let me saw, for we need to escape as soon as possible."

Accordingly they both set to work, and with a fair prospect of soon having an opening made. But there were loud shouts outside, and the outlaws began to roll barrels of whisky aboard the barge.

"They are loading up," said Buckhorn, in vexation, "and we shall have to quit, lest we attract attention to our efforts at escaping. You crouch yonder in the corner, and I'll hide these tools, and assume my old position of a corpse."

The tools were secreted under the bed, and then each possessing a loaded revolver, Pearl and the Boy Scourge assumed their relative positions, and waited.

CHAPTER XV.

PLAYING GHOST—CAPTURING THE TRAIN.

THE work of loading the barge occupied considerable time, which was positive torture to the two prisoners. The barrels were rolled by hand down the hill out of the island balsam woods, and thence onto the pier, from whence it was but a step onto the barge. Some fifteen or twenty men were engaged in the work of bringing and loading—all of them rough fellows, with lanterns slung at their hips. Among them, the two leading spirits were Captains Coffin and Gregg, but they did not participate in the labor, except its supervision. After lying awhile, Buckhorn Bill arose, and placed the table and chair before the eastern window.

"I ain't a-goin' ter play stiff until it is necessary," he said to Pearl, with a cool laugh. "I don't reckon those fellows will invade until they're through with their work."

So he mounted upon his perch to look from the window. It was interesting to watch the strange, weird scene; to see with what skill the heavy barrels were handled. Some seventy or eighty barrels of this illicit whisky were brought down and loaded upon the barge; then the lights were put out, and the majority of the men tramped back into the balsam woods of the island. Two remained upon the barge, Gregg and Captain Coffin. They appeared to be engaged in animated conversation upon some topic, but from his position Bill was not able to catch the drift of it.

"I wish they'd go along off the barge, so's I could finish that job," he muttered. "Ain't afraid, are ye, Miss Pearl?"

"No!" was the answer, in a fearless tone—"not when I've got a weapon to defend myself with. Are those men all gone?"

"All but Coffin and another galoot. They're out here talkin' yet."

"Do you think they'll come in here?"

"Probably they will. I was just wishin' they would, so that I could go on with my carpenter work."

But the two outlaws did not appear to be of a retiring disposition, for they chatted on, undisturbedly.

"I have an idea, Miss Pearl," Buckhorn said, awhile later. "Pray excuse me for my seeming impertinence, but, *do you wear white petticoats?*"

"Why, y-e-s!" the astonished girl replied, her cheeks crimsoning. "Why?"

"Because, if you've got a couple you can conveniently do without, I want to borrow them. Here's my plan, in a nutshell, as they say. I've just been lucky enough to discover a piece of chalk in my pocket. With it I'll whiten my face, and by aid of your skirts transform myself into a creditable ghost."

Pearl saw that it was not worth while to let mock modesty interfere, where there was any show of escaping from their desperate dilemma; so, while Bill turned his attention to matters outside, she divested herself of her underskirts, and then Bill came down, and she handed them to him, with a flushed face and drooping eyes.

Arranging one skirt about his waist, so that it fell to his feet, he shirred the other about his neck. This made him a full flowing robe. And then when his face was whitened with chalk, and a large white handkerchief tied down over his head, he presented truly a frightful appearance.

"There; will I make a good ghost?" he demanded, turning to Pearl.

"Yes, capital," she replied with a smile. "Do you expect to frighten those men with that appearance?"

"I'm going to try it," Bill replied, whitening his hands. "Both of them I believe to be cowards at heart, and if I can scare them, so much the better, for they'll most likely vamose, and we can finish our job; yonder."

"But you may be wrong, and they may shoot you."

"Oh! I'll watch out for that. I'll keep an eye on 'em when they come in, and if they pull a 'pussy,' I'll drop 'em both, on short notice."

Pearl, at Bill's request, lay prone upon the floor, in a position apt to cause one to think she had fainted and fallen. Then the young Scourge took a position toward the rear end of the prison, first having arranged his hat and jacket upon the cot, so as to look as if he still lay there.

It was fully an hour ere anything was heard of the two outlaws; then a key grated in the lock, and the door of the apartment swung partly open—wide enough to admit the head and masked face of Captain Coffin.

He gave a glance around. The candle was flickering fitfully on the table; Pearl lay upon the floor, apparently in a dead swoon; at the further end of the apartment stood a tall, white-draped thing, with a face as white as alabaster, and one finger of the right hand was pointing directly at the door. Coffin took this all in; then jerked the door shut with a frightful oath, followed by a wild sepulchral laugh from the inside.

"Ten thousand devils!" he gasped, turning to Gregg—"I saw a ghost—the boy's ghost!"

"Get out!" the other whisky captain replied, incredulously.

"But I did!" asserted Coffin, shivering from head to foot, strong, rough man though he was. "Never see'd sech a thing before in my life. Look in, ef ye don't b'lieve me. See 'f the boy's body is lyin' on the bed. I didn't notice."

Never having believed in ghosts or supernatural things, Gregg poked his head inside the door, to be positive that Coffin had not gone stark mad. But what he saw, and the fearful groan he heard, caused him to draw back and shut the door, with an execration. His face was a strange gray, and he quaked in every joint.

"It is a ghost!" he whispered, his breath coming in gasps. "I see'd et, an' heerd et groan. Lord!"

"D ye see the boy?" gasped Coffin.

"Yes—he war lyin' on ther cot, jest where we left him. Hain't budged sence we tuk him in thar. The gal's gone clear fainted on ther floor."

"Then et's a real ghost of the young imp's?"

"On course it is. Let's go an' tell ther boys. Mebbe we can get them to bu'st the old coop over inter ther lake. Come, let's git!"

Locking the door the two superstitious men took to their heels, and never left off running until they were out of sight of the supposed haunted barge.

Within the prison Buckhorn Bill and Pearl were nearly convulsed with laughter, for they had overheard the words of the two cowards.

"Hurrah!" and Bill danced about lightly in his ghostly attire, "I never hed so much fun in my life. Warn't they scared tho'? Great Jerusalem! I took 'em to have more sand than that."

"It was a good ruse," said Pearl, laughing too; "but now we must to work, and get out of this before they come back to us."

"Is the door locked?"

"Yes, they were thoughtful enough to lock it after them."

"Well, then we'll have to resort to the saws again. It's only ten minutes' more work to have the hole cut through."

"Yes, but—but—"

"Oh! yes, I know—you want your prettycoats, eh? Excuse me for not thinking of that before."

He soon had them off, and while he set to work with the saw again, Pearl took advantage of a dark corner to resume the wearing of them.

Then she too lent her aid, with the saw, and they both worked faithfully, until the sweat came upon their faces. And at last their labors were rewarded, for Bill pushed out a portion of the wall about three feet square, and it toppled first onto the barge, and then fell with a splash into the lake.

"There we are," Bill exclaimed, joyfully. "Now, Miss Pearl, let's see ef we can't escape."

They climbed out of the prison, and found a skiff awaiting them, containing Molly Miner, the Nymph of the Lake. Also a negro, who held the oars.

"Quick!" Molly cried, joyfully—"Get into this boat, and we will all for ever leave this vicinity. I am so glad you succeeded in cutting through."

"So are we!" Bill said, helping Pearl out of the craft. "There—all right, go ahead, Sambo!"

"See here, don't be too free!" exclaimed the familiar voice of Turtle Tom, "Originally, I ain't no blacker than you."

And then there was a general hand-shaking, and explanations, while the boat was silently nosing out of the bayou.

Tom had succeeded in gaining the island and reporting to Captain Coffin without having his disguise detected; and seeing Molly, he had enlisted her in his service, and together they had captured the tools which had released the two prisoners.

"And now we must get away for Stockton's camp!" the young trapper said, "for we want to be there before the barge starts, which will be about three hours before daybreak."

After Turtle Tom had left the camp of the Red Rifle Team, on his mission to Balsam Island, Captain Ned Stockton first ascertained from the negro, Joe Snow, the actual strength of the bogus emigrant camp, and then made preparations for an attack. Upon learning that he was liable to have to swing from a limb, Snow faithfully promised his services in behalf of the rifle team, and this made their number a round dozen.

In the course of an hour everything was in readiness, and the whisky-hunters stole away from camp, and softly through the timber, along the curving lake-shore toward the camp of the bogus emigrants.

The morning was well advanced, but the emigrant camp appeared quiet and in repose, when Stockton and his men first came in sight of it.

Evidently the emigrants were improving the time for a good rest and sleep. Their oxen had been tethered on the prairie, east of the belt, to graze until they were needed.

"Let them stay there!" Captain Ned said, carelessly. "They can't go far even if they do get loose. Now, then, get ready for business. The camp is all asleep, and at our mercy. Creep in and each of you cover somebody. Where there are two lying close together let one man cover them both. In this way we can make up for their superiority of numbers, and have one or two men to spare."

The work of stealing into camp without arousing any of the ruffians was an extremely difficult and dangerous one, inasmuch as the breaking of a twig was liable to awaken one or more, and such a mishap was but the signal for a pitched battle.

Step by step crept on the dauntless whisky-hunters, each with his trusty repeating-rifle in hand, and belt-weapons cocked for instant use.

At last, after maybe a half-hour's stealthy effort, every person of the bogus emigrants was under the cover either of a repeating-rifle, or a pair of revolvers, and Captain Ned and two of his nearest pals, each had two of the sleepers covered.

Then Dick Reade and Old Elephant began the operation of taking prisoners, without awakening them.

This was far the most delicate matter of all, for the slightest touch seemed to disturb the tranquillity of the sleepers' repose. Of the entire number, however, five were securely bound without being awakened to the reality of their capture.

But the sixth, a burly, villainous half-breed, sprung up, at the first touch, and gave a wild yell, which from its fearful volume could do no less than arouse the remaining sleepers of the camp.

But almost the moment he reached his feet, he fell back again, under a stunning blow from Dick Reade's hard fist; while the click! click! of half a score of weapon-locks admonished the remaining whisky-runners to become inactive. They realized at a glance that they had been caught napping, and gave up without any violent attempt to escape, although there was any amount of grumbling and swearing.

"Bind 'em tight, boys," Stockton ordered, "for we mustn't let our game escape when there's so many legal functionaries in Yankton starving for the want of a fee. Good luck has been ours so far; maybe we can get some of them from the island."

All of the prisoners were securely bound, and chucked into one of the heavy whisky-wagons; then hauled by hand to Stockton's camp on the Northern shore, where they were left in charge of Old Elephant, while Captain Ned and his gallant band went

back to the scene of their recent victory, to await the coming of the whisky-boat and the illicit distillers.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CLIMAX ACT OF THE DRAMA—FINIS.

BUT they had to wait a long while, as it seemed to them, for the day dragged away slowly, and far into the night, ere anything animated was seen upon the bosom of the lake; and then it was only an empty skiff, evidently floating around on the waves at the will of the breeze.

"I wish they'd hurry up!" stockton growled, as he and Dick Reade paced to and fro under the trees that overhung the eastern beach. "I want to get the matter over with as quickly as possible."

"Yes, so do I, for I don't like the job on one account—we've got to kill off so many in order to get a few."

"True; but maybe we sha'n't have to drop many this time."

"I hope not, for that Ash Stream affair has haunted me ever since."

The night wore on, and still the Rifle Team watched and waited.

While explanations were being made, Turtle Tom, the young trapper, was pulling rapidly away from the island, through the bayou S. In ten minutes they were clear of it, and out on the surface of the lake.

The moon was sinking to rest, and shed but dim light upon the lake.

"You'd better fight wide of the island, Tom," said Buckhorn Bill, keeping his sharp glances darting around. "We don't want to get a blizzard from the enemy when we ain't expecting it."

"No! you're right, Bill—not with these two angels in calico on board. But I don't calkylate we'll hev any trouble from the cusses."

Neither did they, for they soon reached the main land near the location of Stockton's camp, whither they proceeded, to find it deserted, with the exception of Old Elephant, who was acting guard over the wagon-load of prisoners.

And the old fellow was nearly tickled to death to see the young Buckhorn among the party.

"Old Wonders an' all his family!" he exclaimed, relaxing his vigilance long enough to shake hands. "Aire thet you, Sweet William—you, wi' yer skulp on, and your hull diogomy?"

"Yes, Elephant, it's me, as safe and sound as a new trade dollar!" Bill replied. "But, see here; where's this Rifle Team of whom Tom has been telling us?"

"They're watchin' fer ther whisky boat over yonder, near where you first got captured."

"Did you take the train without any trouble?" Turtle Tom asked.

"You bet your life we jest did that—caught every galoot an' galootess asleep, an' had 'em foul, as ther Injun sed, when the white man grabbed him by the skulp. Didn't spill a drop of blood, and got fifteen uv 'em as nice as a pin."

"Where's the nigger?"

"Oh, he's tumbled in over there with the boys. Guess he's jest as white, in his inwards, as any o' us."

"Young ladies!" Buckhorn Bill said, turning to Pearl and Molly, with a courteous bow, "we must needs leave you here in charge of Old Elephant, now, while we go and assist in the capture of the rest of this whisky band. Later, I shall see that you both are conducted to a place of safety, far from here."

Then, Bill and Turtle Tom turned their footsteps toward the whereabouts of the Red Rifle Team.

"I b'lieve them gals aire the lost darters of an old gent we've got among us," said Turtle Tom as they tramped along. "His name is Major Sterling, an' he's bin the loser of a pair o' female children, thet aire by this time about the age o' them back yonder."

An', it turns out that this Cap. Coffin, who is the major's brother, was the abductor of the gals, in their childhood, sum fifteen or less years ago—I don't jest remember the time. Now, et looks likely to me that the gals are his'n."

"Undoubtedly they are, and if so, Turtle Tom's solid fer one of 'em, seein's he's penetrated the bizness and been the means of restorin' them to their parent!" assented Buckhorn, with a laugh. "Reckon Miss Molly has got plenty of admiring glances fer a fellow about your statter."

"Ye ain't jealous, Bill?"

"Pooh! no; jealousy ain't one o' my failings. Reckon I ken git along several years yet, wi'out annexing myself."

"Oh! that'll do to tell, but I'm bettin' you cop in one of these lovely sisters."

"Then you bet on the wrong hoss," said Bill, grimly. "Don't hanker much after females—ef I had poor mother and little Maolin back, I'd be content;" and the young Scourge's voice grew suddenly choked, and tears filled his handsome eyes.

"I reckon you won't get over that soon, eh, Bill?" said Turtle Tom, sympathizingly.

"Get over it! No! never!" and he became silent and stern.

At last they were aroused by the challenge of an outposted picket, and then admitted to the presence of the rangers.

Turtle Tom was welcomed back with enthusiasm, and Captain Ned Stockton had a hearty handshake with Buckhorn Bill, for the two were old friends of one summer-time's buffalo-hunt upon the plains.

In less than an hour a huge reflection of light curved around the island; the barge was coming.

"What power of locomotion have they for the craft, Tom?" Captain Ned asked, pacing to and fro in front of his men, whom he had ordered to fall back in under the cover of the woods.

"A steam boiler and engine, which runs a stern paddle-wheel. The barge is guided by a wheel in the engine house," replied Tom.

"What would you advise, as you know pretty well how matters are conducted?"

"You must first build a bonfire on the beach yonder, and then back the wagons down to the water's edge. This is to deceive them into believing that all is right. Conceal your men in the wagons, and the moment the rascals are near enough to secure a good aim, open on them. It is your only hope, for if you try to capture them you'll most likely get the worst of it."

"I don't like to slaughter them off like that. I'd rather fight 'em face to face, and fairly!" protested Stockton.

"And get licked like blazes!" retorted the trapper. "Well, if you like to make yourself an open target, go in an' get the worth of your money. I'll stay back in under cover and watch you."

This decided the matter. By Stockton's orders a huge bonfire of dry material was kindled on the beach, and the wagons were backed down, so that the hind wheels rested in the edge of the lake.

The men were then divided into three companies, and stationed in the center tier of wagons, Stockton, Buckhorn Bill, and Turtle Tom commanding.

By this time the barge had approached to within the distance of a quarter of a mile, and distinctly visible were the barrels, and upon these lounged perhaps a score of men.

As he watched the barge approaching, and the men lying upon the barrels, a strange expression came over the features of Buckhorn Bill, and he left his own wagon and entered that of Turtle Tom.

"Have you made the discovery?" he demanded, excitedly.

"No—what discovery?" young Frailey asked, wondering.

"That those men on the barge are lying in rather unnatural positions, and have not moved since they came in sight."

"Well—what is there strange about that?"

"To me, there is much. I believe that *every man over yonder is dead!* Look, and see for yourself!"

There was certainly something strange in the matter, for none of the ruffians moved. Naturally there would be a stir on board upon approaching the shore.

The news was quickly spread to Captain Stockton, and to the rest of the men, and the approaching craft was regarded with curiosity. Soon it became apparent beyond a doubt that those on board were dead, for bloody wounds could be seen in several of the foreheads.

As soon as they were all satisfied beyond a doubt, the watchers left the wagons, and gathered on the beach. Slowly the barge came nearer to the shore, and at last grounded upon the silvery sands.

Then the whisky-hunters went aboard, and gazed about them. There was but one living outlaw on board, and he was lying in the cabin prison where Buckhorn had been confined.

It was the acting chief of the illicit whisky ring—the notorious and fiendish leader of the Press-Gang, Captain Coffin.

All the other outlaws had either been stabbed in the forehead by some sharp instrument, or had been killed by a tiny shot which had left a pin-head mark of blood upon the breast just over the heart. They had evidently been killed and placed in positions to suit the strange avenger.

"This is a terrible destruction," said Buckhorn Bill, with a shudder. "Tom, go shut off the steam, and drag out that wretch, Captain Coffin."

Young Frailey obeyed, and in five minutes the captain of the whisky outlaws lay helplessly before his enemies, upon the deck of the barge, unmasked.

He was a fierce, brutal-looking man in facial aspect, with bloodshot eyes, a cruel mouth, and an iron-gray mustache; a man, at a glance, who would not hesitate at the commission of any crime.

He flushed and flinched uneasily beneath the stern accusing gaze of the Boy Scourge, and a grayer shade came upon his countenance.

"Villain, ruffian, human wolf!" Buckhorn Bill said, hoarsely, "you are at last at the end of your rope. You have committed your last crime—the last of your inhuman outrages, here upon the earth. I want to know who it was who did this work of destruction, that we might not have it to do?"

"That devil who has ever haunted us since two years ago—Old Death Shadow!" replied the outlaw, fiercely. "While I was engineering the craft, he came aboard, killed my men with that needle-gun of his, made me a prisoner, and then escaped."

"Then I say hurray fer Old Death Shadow!" cried Turtle Tom. "Here, Major Sterling—we've got that outlaw brother of yours; d'ye want to let him taste the toe of your brogan?"

"No," replied the major, coming forward and gazing coldly down at the prisoner. "I have no pity for the wretch who murdered my wife and stole away my children. Let the law and God deal with him, for I will not lay a hand upon him."

"Ha! ha!" sneered Coffin, "but if I am not freed you will never get those children, and I swear it!"

"But there is just where you make a mistake!" said Turtle Tom, triumphantly, "for I have Mr. Sterling's two daughters in my possession now—the two girls who have been known as Pearl Prescott and Molly Miner, and they are the children you once sold to Whisky Bill for a pair of rifles!"

"Then, God be praised that I am at last to be restored to my children!" devoutly said the major.

A consultation was held upon the barge, and it was universally decided that it was the best plan to take Coffin with the rest of the captured outlaws, to Squatterville, and put them under guard, and then return to the lake to besiege the remaining distillers on Balsam Island.

The dead ruffians were, by Stockton's orders, buried in the forest, and the illicit whisky emptied into the lake.

Then, with Coffin in charge, the Rifle Team and Buckhorn returned to the original camp of the team.

while Turtle Tom remained in the vicinity of the barge to keep watch and learn what he could.

At the camp there was a joyous meeting between Major Sterling and his two twin daughters—for he had no doubt, after a glance, that they indeed were his daughters. Lewis Sterling, the Captain Coffin of our narrative, did not deny but that they were the children he had stolen away, when he saw that it was no longer possible to deny their identity. We might dwell at length on the gladsome reunion, but choose simply to record it.

On the second day after the capture of Captain Coffin, Captain Ned Stockton and his so-called Rifle Team, took their prisoners, sixteen in number, from the camp on the lake-shore, and set out in the now useless whisky train of wagons, for Squatterville. Major Sterling was not desirous of longer staying in the wilderness, and so, with his two charming daughters, of whom he was so proud, he accompanied the train to Burnham's colony, where he declared it his intention to permanently locate, on one of the choice growing ranches, several of which he owned.

Buckhorn Bill, Turtle Tom and Old Elephant were left at the lake-shore, to keep an eye out for the remaining outlaws upon Balsam Island. But though they kept a vigilant watch upon the lake and island, no stir of animated life was seen. The greatest quiet prevailed, like on a Sabbath day. Even the birds were less musical than usual, and in the forest upon the shore, a strange hush and silence prevailed.

"I'll bet my rights to ther next Presidency, that thar ain't a cussed outlaw on that island!" said Tom Frailey, as the three met at the barge.

"Thar ain't so much as one o' the suckers sneezed over thar, I tell ye."

"But they may be thar, though," replied Buckhorn Bill, "although I am inclined ter ther belief that they've given us the slip. It would be a bitter pill for Stockton."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't believe he set much store on them what's left over there. He's already got a fat figure out of the sixteen he has got."

"True, but it would do me good to see him get 'em all."

This conversation took place in the afternoon of the day after Stockton's departure.

A fierce rain and wind-storm was brewing, gathering every minute preparatory to a final outburst.

They took shelter in one of the rude cabins of the barge. Soon the storm came tearing down from the sky, and through the woods with unprecedented fury.

The rain fell in torrents, and the wind howled and shrieked like an infuriated demon in chains.

Great trees were broken off or torn up by the roots, and limbs, sticks and even stones were blown through the air with a terrible force. In less than five minutes the lake had risen as many inches, and the barge was suddenly swept off into the storm-tossed waters.

"Ugh! this is a leetle ther wu'st quandarical deef-kilty I war ever in!" grunted Old Elephant, staring at his two companions with a startled expression of countenance. "G'wine ter be another Antediluve, ain't thar?"

"Guess not," Buckhorn Bill replied. "Et'll soon blow over, and we'll be all right."

It did soon blow over, but when the setting sun again broke from the clouds, the barge was beached high upon the shore of Balsam Island!

As soon as night came on, the three set forth through the dense balsam forest, to learn if any of the outlaws yet were on the island.

Not a hundred yards had they advanced, when, in a little rocky glade, they came upon one of the most horrible sights they had ever been fated to meet with.

It was a human skeleton, bereft of all flesh and skin, bound to a young sapling. That the man had been lately killed, was evidenced by an occasional piece of flesh which was found in the neighborhood.

He had first been murdered, and then the flesh had been cleaved from his body, with knives. It was a sickening sight—a sickening realization of the inhumanity of man toward man. That it was the work of the whisky outlaws, there could be no doubt.

Near by were the buckskin garments of the victim, and from one of the pockets thereof, Turtle Tom brought to light a document, which threw some light on the subject.

The following is a portion of it:

"My name is properly Philip Burnham, originally the founder of Burnham's colony. Latterly, when known at all, it has been as Old Death Shadow, the man with the silent weapon (which is a needle-gun, of my own invention). . . . Two years ago or over, I was captured by Captain Coffin's hellish Press-Gang, and forced to work in an illicit whisky distillery on the Balsam Island in Loon Lake, not many miles from the settlement of Squatterville, Dakota.

"I escaped after two months of the terrible torturing labor, and not wishing to be found by the hell-hounds again, I went immediately down into the lower part of the territory, knowing that my family were well provided for until my return. Alas! on my return I found that they had been murdered by the Press-Gang—all except my boy, Bill, who was now roaming about on the prairie as a young avenger of his mother's and sister's deaths. I became an avenger also, and for the last two years have waged a deadly warfare against the whisky outlaws. I cannot enumerate all that I have killed of them. I have just sent a cargo of them ashore, on board a barge-load of whisky, Coffin being the only one who will see shore alive. I left him for my son to finish."

There was much more in detail, and last of all an appended will, bequeathing all the Burnham wealth and possessions to Buckhorn Bill; but in a nutshell we have given the main facts brought to light by the document.

The grief of fatherless, motherless Bill was terrible, and will be lasting, but he is better able to stand it than though the affliction had been visited upon him at an earlier period of his life.

Captain Ned Stockton and his Rifle Team came back to the lake, only to be met by Buckhorn Bill and his two companions, with the news that the late storm and lightning had totally destroyed the Balsam Island distillery, and that the outlaws had all escaped. A week's search for them ensued, but they were never heard from again.

The captured whisky outlaws all received trials at Yankton, and long sentences, except Cap Coffin, who was one night taken from jail by a party of unknown men, and strung up.

The "service" men known to have been in the power of the outlaws, have never been found or heard from. That they were put out of the way was evident.

The president of the whisky ring was captured, and turned out to be a noted speculator of the West. He, with Judge Fowler, received trials, and long sentences.

Not three months ago old Major Sterling died, and on his death bed, before the welcome messenger came to guide him across the dark river, he joined the hands of Pearl Sterling and Captain Stockton, and piquant Molly and Tom Frailey, together, and invoked upon them his dying blessing, even as the clergyman pronounced them man and wife. Long may they live!

Among those present were Buckhorn Bill and Old Elephant.

Of this youth of whom we have been writing and reading, dear reader, let us say a closing word. We have not chosen a wholly fictitious character in him, to portray—for the hero, as the author has proven him to be, is William Burnham, at present writing, of Yankton, Dakota—the Buckhorn Bill of our story.

THE END.



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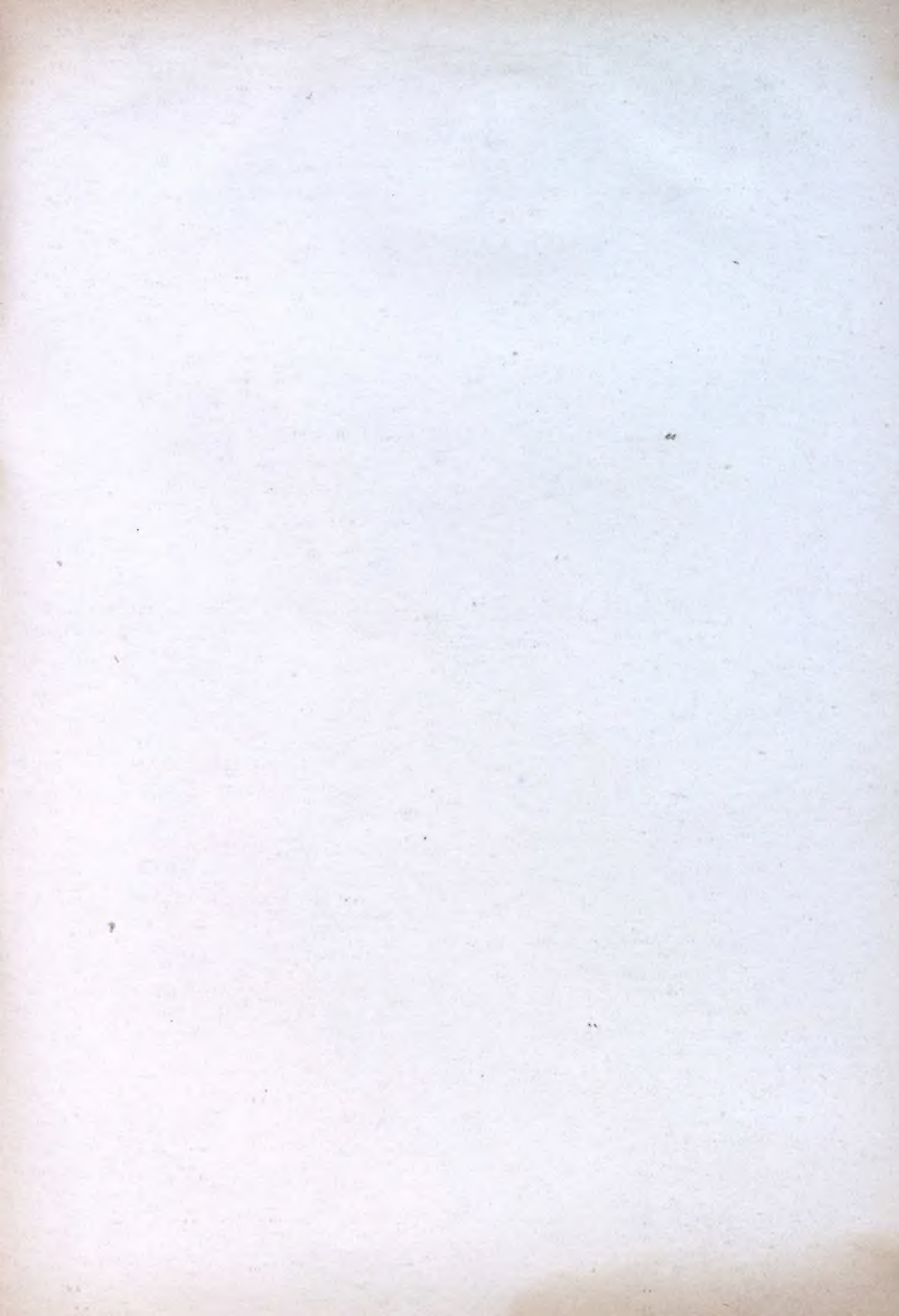
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